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What Strategic Posture Should France Adopt in the Middle East?



Héloïse FAYET

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Focus stratégique

Resolving today's security problems requires an integrated approach. Analysis must be cross-cutting and consider the regional and global dimensions of problems, their technological and military aspects, as well as their media linkages and broader human consequences. It must also strive to understand the far-reaching and complex dynamics of military transformation, international terrorism and post-conflict stabilization. Through the “**Focus stratégique**” series, Ifri's Security Studies Center aims to do all this, offering new perspectives on the major international security issues in the world today.

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Executive Summary

France has many strategic interests to defend in the Middle East. Security interests, such as the protection of its citizens and the fight against terrorism, are still at the top of these priorities, even though counterinsurgency is becoming a second-order issue for the states in the region. This security commitment is more broadly aimed at ensuring the conditions necessary for the proper development of other activities, notably economic, diplomatic, and cultural. They contribute to the preservation of France's influence in the Middle East, and thus to its maintenance as a global power. For example, France wishes to secure its energy supplies and guarantee freedom of navigation. Moreover, although trade with the countries of the region remains limited, specific sectors of the French economy have significant market shares in the region.

These interests are defended by a visible French presence, heir to the "Arab policy" led by Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s, which aimed to straighten out the strained relations between France and the Arab countries. This policy allowed France to regain a foothold in the region as an alternative power between the two Cold War blocs by offering unconditional support to certain Arab regimes in order to secure access to energy resources and find an outlet for the French arms industry. This posture lost its relevance at the end of the Cold War, when most countries in the region turned to the American superpower. The emergence of Islamist terrorism in the Middle East marked a new evolution in the French posture: while Paris refused for a time to support American adventurism in Iraq, the Arab Spring and the rise of Daesh from 2011 onward forced France to switch to permanent crisis management, for which the military tool was much in demand.

Today, France has three main poles of military presence in the Middle East, bringing together nearly 2,000 men: in the Iraqi-Syrian-Jordanian zone for Operation Chammal, which mobilizes the Air and Space Force and the special forces against Daesh; in the Persian Gulf with the French Forces in the United Arab Emirates (FFEAU); and in Lebanon through Operation Daman, the French participation in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). This posture is also based on long-standing political relations with most of the states in the region, where the UAE, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq appear to be privileged partners, albeit each with their own fragilities. However, the solidity of these partnerships, and even the entire French strategy in the Middle East, risks being called into question by the recent geopolitical shifts that have brought new challenges to the region.

The resizing of the American presence, which has been underway for several years but which took concrete form with the withdrawal from Afghanistan, is part of these developments. Justified by the fact that the terrorist threat has diminished and by the need for the United States to mobilize its resources to compete with China, this redefinition comes with a growing sense of responsibility on the part of the United States' partners in the region, particularly the Gulf states and Israel through the Abraham Accords. This new alliance, which allows the Jewish state to change its role in the Middle East, was built in the face of a common enemy: Iran. Tehran and its "axis of resistance" still represent a concrete threat to France and its interests in the region, although the growing heterogeneity of this axis makes it potentially vulnerable to manipulations aimed at reducing its dangerousness. The space left by the United States also represents an opportunity for extra-regional powers such as China, Russia, and Turkey, which are competing more and more fiercely in the region and which are appealing to France's historical partners. Finally, the war in Ukraine is affecting certain regional balances, for example in Syria, while the apparent neutrality of the Gulf states does not correspond to Western expectations.

These developments point to a growing mismatch between France's current posture and the challenges it faces in the Middle East, thus calling for a redefinition of its strategy. The counterterrorist focus, which is still the main motivation for France's military presence in the region, must be questioned as its partners, particularly its Iraqi and Syrian partners, lose interest in this struggle. If it does not propose new forms of support, France risks being overtaken by its competitors, or even its allies, and losing credibility with its partners.

More broadly, the entire partnership strategy would benefit from being reviewed, prioritizing French interests and not hesitating to question historical ties, for example with the Kurds. Moreover, a reflection should also be carried out on French policy toward the Gulf states, which are less and less loyal to Western suppliers in terms of armaments and are facing the challenges of the post-oil era. Finally, although the France-Israel relationship is limited due to France's historical support for the two-state solution and the importance of the Israeli-American partnership, common security interests push for its redefinition.

In addition to an evolution of the partnership strategy, which could be based on the signing of more defense agreements or status of forces agreements, a reconfiguration of the command zones is another avenue for reflection. It would allow for greater efficiency in France's regional defense policy, a more refined relationship adapted to the needs of partners, as well as an economy of means. It could involve decoupling the function of Commander of the FFEAU from that of Admiral Commander of Maritime Forces in the Indian Ocean (ALINDIEN), the latter's area of responsibility being too large to cover the entire Middle East effectively. The creation of a

Commander of Forces in the Near and Middle East (COMFOR PMO) could result from this, with a nerve center located within the FFEAU, and regional variations according to needs, with the BAP H5 air base in Jordan being established on a permanent footing as an operational pole of cooperation (*pôle opérationnel de coopération*; POC) for the Near East.

Finally, this process should be based on an interministerial approach, according to a framework document similar to the French Strategy for the Indo-Pacific, in order to mobilize all of the levers of influence available to France in the region, such as development aid, Instituts français, or France's media network abroad. To reach its level of ambition, France also has every interest in coordinating with its European partners who share security and energy interests in the region, despite differences of opinion and the limits of the means deployed so far.

Résumé

La France a de nombreux intérêts stratégiques à défendre au Moyen-Orient. Les intérêts de sécurité, tels que la protection des ressortissants et la lutte contre le terrorisme, sont encore en haut de ces priorités, alors même que la contre-insurrection devient un enjeu de second ordre pour les États de la région. Cet engagement sécuritaire vise plus largement à assurer les conditions nécessaires au bon développement d'autres activités, notamment économiques, diplomatiques et culturelles. Elles concourent à la conservation de l'influence française au Moyen-Orient, et ainsi à son maintien comme puissance politique d'envergure mondiale. La France souhaite par exemple y sécuriser ses approvisionnements énergétiques et y garantir la liberté de navigation. De plus, si les échanges avec les pays de la région restent limités, certains secteurs spécifiques de l'économie française y ont des parts de marché importantes.

Ces intérêts sont défendus par une présence française visible, héritière de la « politique arabe » impulsée par le général de Gaulle dans les années 1960 et qui visait à remettre à plat des relations tendues entre la France et les pays arabes. Cette politique permet à la France de reprendre pied dans la région comme puissance alternative entre les deux blocs de la guerre froide en proposant un soutien sans conditions à certains régimes arabes afin de sécuriser l'accès aux ressources énergétiques et trouver un débouché à l'industrie française d'armement. Cette posture perd en pertinence à la fin de la guerre froide, où la plupart des pays de la région se tourne vers la super-puissance américaine. L'émergence du terrorisme islamiste au Moyen-Orient marque une nouvelle évolution dans la posture française : si Paris se refuse un temps à cautionner l'aventurisme américain en Irak, les printemps arabes et la montée en puissance de Daech à partir de 2011 obligent la France à basculer vers une gestion de crise permanente, pour laquelle l'outil militaire est très sollicité.

Aujourd'hui, la France dispose ainsi de trois principaux pôles de présence militaire au Moyen-Orient, qui rassemblent près de 2 000 hommes : dans la zone irako-syro-jordanienne pour l'opération Chammal, qui mobilise l'armée de l'Air et de l'Espace et les forces spéciales contre Daech ; dans le golfe persique avec les Forces françaises aux Émirats arabes unis (FFEAU), et au Liban au travers de l'opération Daman, participation française à la Force intérimaire des Nations unies au Liban (FINUL). Cette posture s'appuie également sur des relations politiques de longue date avec la plupart des États de la région, où les EAU, la Jordanie, l'Égypte et l'Irak apparaissent comme des partenaires privilégiés mais ayant chacun leurs fragilités. Cependant, la solidité de ces partenariats, voire

l'ensemble de la stratégie française au Moyen-Orient, risquent d'être remis en question par les récentes recompositions géopolitiques qui font émerger de nouveaux défis.

Le redimensionnement de la présence américaine dans la région, engagé depuis plusieurs années mais qui s'est concrétisé par le retrait d'Afghanistan, irrigue une partie de ces évolutions. Justifiée par le constat de baisse de la menace terroriste et par la nécessité américaine de mobiliser ses moyens dans la compétition face à la Chine, cette redéfinition s'accompagne d'une responsabilisation croissante des partenaires des États-Unis sur place, notamment les pays du Golfe et Israël au travers des accords d'Abraham. Cette nouvelle alliance, qui permet à l'État hébreu de changer de rôle au Moyen-Orient, s'est construite face à un ennemi commun : l'Iran. Téhéran et son « axe de la résistance » représentent encore une menace concrète pour la France et ses intérêts dans la région, bien que l'hétérogénéité croissante de cet axe le rende potentiellement vulnérable à des manipulations visant à réduire sa dangerosité. La place laissée par les États-Unis est aussi une opportunité pour des puissances extra-régionales comme la Chine, la Russie ou la Turquie, qui mènent une compétition de plus en plus féroce dans la région et qui séduisent les partenaires historiques de la France. Enfin, la guerre en Ukraine affecte certains équilibres régionaux, par exemple en Syrie, tandis que l'apparente neutralité des pays du Golfe ne correspond pas aux attendus occidentaux.

Ces évolutions dressent le constat d'une inadéquation grandissante entre la posture actuelle française et les défis auxquels la France fait face au Moyen-Orient, et imposent donc une redéfinition de la stratégie. La focale contre-terroriste, qui est encore la principale motivation de la présence militaire française de la région, doit ainsi être remise en question au fur et à mesure de la perte de motivation des partenaires, notamment irakiens et syriens, pour cette lutte. Si elle ne propose pas de nouvelles formes de soutien, la France risque d'être dépassée par ses compétiteurs, voire ses alliés, et perdre en crédibilité auprès des partenaires.

Plus largement, l'ensemble de la stratégie partenariale gagnerait à être revu, en priorisant les intérêts français et sans hésiter à remettre en question des liens historiques, par exemple avec les Kurdes. De plus, une réflexion devrait également être menée sur la politique française à l'égard des pays du Golfe, de moins en moins fidèles aux fournisseurs occidentaux en matière d'armement et confrontés aux enjeux de l'après-pétrole. Enfin, bien que la relation franco-israélienne soit limitée du fait du soutien historique de la France à la solution à deux États et de l'importance du partenariat israélo-américain, des intérêts de sécurité communs poussent pour une redéfinition de cette relation.

Outre une évolution de la stratégie partenariale, qui pourrait s'appuyer sur la signature d'accords de défense ou de statut des forces plus nombreux, une reconfiguration des zones de commandement est une autre piste de

réflexion. Elle permettrait une plus grande efficacité de la politique de défense régionale de la France, une relation plus fine et adaptée aux besoins des partenaires, ainsi qu'une économie des moyens. Elle pourrait passer par un découplage de la fonction de commandant des FFEAU de celle d'amiral commandant les forces maritimes en océan Indien (ALINDIEN), la zone de responsabilité de ce dernier étant trop large pour couvrir de façon efficace le Moyen-Orient. La création d'un Commandant des forces au Proche et Moyen-Orient (COMFOR PMO) pourrait en résulter, avec un centre névralgique situé au sein des FFEAU, et des déclinaisons régionales en fonction des besoins, la BAP H5 en Jordanie pouvant être pérennisée en un Pôle opérationnel de coopération (POC) pour le Proche-Orient.

Enfin, cette démarche devrait être conduite dans une approche interministérielle, selon un document de cadrage semblable à la Stratégie française pour l'Indo-Pacifique, afin de mobiliser l'ensemble des leviers d'influence dont dispose la France dans la région, tels que l'aide au développement, les instituts français ou son réseau médiatique à l'étranger. Pour atteindre son niveau d'ambition, la France a également tout intérêt à se coordonner avec ses partenaires européens qui partagent des intérêts sécuritaires et énergétiques dans la région, et ce, malgré des divergences de vues et la limite des moyens déployés jusqu'à présent.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	12
A STRATEGIC POSTURE INHERITED FROM HISTORY	15
Strong, Historical Ties	15
<i>An Ancient Heritage.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>The Era of the "Arab Policy"</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>A Shift toward Crisis Management.....</i>	<i>22</i>
A Visible Military Presence Still Centered around the Fight against Terrorism	26
<i>The Fight against Daesh: Means and Results.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Terrorism, an Increasingly Low Priority for Partner Nations</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>The End of the American War on Terror and What It Means for France</i>	<i>34</i>
A MILITARY PRESENCE CALLED INTO QUESTION BY THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE REGION	38
France Faced with the "Axis of Resistance"	39
<i>The Nuclear Impasse.....</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>Increasingly Troublesome Proxies.....</i>	<i>43</i>
France and the "Axis of Abraham": Distance or Rapprochement?.....	48
<i>The Abraham Accords: A Still Fragile Creation</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>The Gulf States, France's Priority Partners in the Axis</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>Jordan and Egypt, Partners that Are Less Stable than They Appear ...</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>A Necessary Revolution of Franco-Israeli Relations</i>	<i>64</i>
The Challenge of Extra-Regional Powers	66
<i>The Destabilizing Return of Russia in the Middle East.....</i>	<i>66</i>
<i>The Asian Powers: Economic Competitors with Little Investment in Defense</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>Turkey's Ambitions to Become a "Coopetitor".....</i>	<i>70</i>
TOWARD A STRATEGY FOCUSED ON COMPETITION	73
A Strategy of Defending France's Interests	74
<i>Multiple, Complementary Interests.....</i>	<i>74</i>
<i>Getting Involved in Strategic Competition</i>	<i>77</i>

A Strategy of Defending France’s Interests	78
<i>Establishing Defense Agreements and Legal Protections for the Armed Forces.....</i>	<i>78</i>
<i>Rethinking the Partnership Strategy in a Context of Strategic Competition</i>	<i>80</i>
<i>Reconfiguring the Military Presence around Better-Defined Poles.....</i>	<i>83</i>
Decomartmentalizing and Coordinating Efforts in Order to Align Strategy and Means.....	86
<i>Interministerial Efforts to Diversify Influence.....</i>	<i>86</i>
<i>Rethinking the French Posture from a European Perspective</i>	<i>90</i>
CONCLUSION	93

Introduction

On May 15, 2022, just a few days after his reelection, President Macron made the first overseas trip of his second presidential term. Although the war in Ukraine was high on his diplomatic agenda, he did not travel to Kiev or Berlin, but to Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). He was thus the first Western leader to arrive in the federation to pay homage to Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Emirati president who had died two days earlier. After having offered his condolences to the Emirati people, Macron greeted the new president of the UAE and emir of Abu Dhabi, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, known as MbZ, with whom the French president has a warm relationship.

This visit was one of several made by Macron to the Middle East,¹ including to Lebanon in August 2020 after the explosion at the Port of Beirut, and to Iraq in August 2021 for a regional summit backed by France. Although the region has lost political prominence in the wake of the crises in Ukraine, the Sahel, or even Taiwan, these visits demonstrate that it nonetheless remains of major interest to France, whether for security, economic, or cultural reasons. The “area from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea” and the “Arabian Gulf” are among the areas identified as “a priority for the defence and security of France” in the *National Strategic Review 2022*.²

After Africa, the Middle East is the second-largest area of French overseas military activity: almost 2,000 military personnel are currently deployed there, split between the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL, 700 personnel), Operation Chammal, which is fighting against the expansion of Daesh (600 personnel), and the French Forces in the United Arab Emirates (FFEAU, 650 personnel).³ The numerous crises and wars that have shaken the region in recent years, for example in Iraq and Syria, have encouraged France to deploy a significant presence and to put security interests at the top of its list of priorities.

1. The definition of the Middle East as a geographical area is much debated. In this study, the choice was made to adopt the delineation used by French government bodies (Ministry of the Armed Forces, Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, etc.). The countries included are Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, and Iran.

2. Secretariat-General for National Defense and Security, *National Strategic Review 2022*, November 9, 2022, 23.

3. Although not in the Middle East, the French Forces in Djibouti (FFDJ) also play a role in the region as a power projection base for the Red Sea, or even the Persian Gulf in the event of a major crisis.

As well as combating terrorism, thereby reducing the risk of the threat spreading to French territory, France's presence in the Middle East is also aimed at protecting its energy supplies (14% of oil consumed in France is imported from the region) and freedom of navigation. The Suez Canal, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, and the Strait of Hormuz are crucial maritime corridors for French trade with Asia, as well as the gateway to France's overseas territories. Although economic relations between France and the Middle East are weak (just 3% of French exports end up in the region, giving a trade balance in equilibrium at 12 billion euros per year), France has economic interests to defend there, for example in the construction, green energy, or high-tech sectors. Finally, France draws on its long history of involvement in the region to champion its vision of international relations, based on peace and multilateralism, with the help of its long-standing partners like the UAE, Egypt, or Jordan.

Nevertheless, this strategic posture is now being called into question by regional geopolitical shifts. France's foreign policy in the Middle East underwent an initial evolution at the beginning of the 2010s: the Arab Spring, which came as a surprise to many diplomats, and the overthrow or weakening of regimes with which France had previously had close ties pushed the French strategy toward crisis management, involving sometimes risky choices. The emergence of Daesh, which forced France to deploy more troops and to commit fully to the fight against terrorism, was the second upheaval.

Other ongoing changes are also requiring Paris to think carefully about its strategic posture. First, the downsizing of the American presence in the Middle East signals the US's desire to focus its efforts on strategic competition with China and Russia. But the extent of this withdrawal should not be overstated: anxious not to offend its partners, the US continues to sell arms to countries like the UAE or Saudi Arabia, while more than 36,500 American military personnel are still deployed in the Middle Eastern theater.

Alongside this downsizing, the US is attempting to shift increasing responsibility onto its partners and to encourage regional integration as a way to stabilize the area. The Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel, Bahrain, and the UAE,⁴ are the result of the US's efforts to retain a presence in the area through its partners, to whom it outsources the protection of its interests, and demonstrate its success in unifying some of its allies against the common threat of Iran. This alliance is fragile, however, because of its members' opportunism (as illustrated by the

4. The normalization of relations between Israel and Morocco, and then Israel and Sudan, was announced immediately afterward. Although these agreements have implications for Israel's posture toward the Muslim world, they fall outside the scope of this study and are therefore not discussed here.

proximity between the UAE and Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine), the absence of Saudi Arabia, and the failure to resolve the Palestinian question.

Finally, this partial disengagement was made possible by the reduction of the terrorist threat: although Daesh retains significant potential for resurgence, particularly in the camps and prisons of northeastern Syria, it carries out fewer attacks each year. As a result, France's regional partners, and more broadly the Western nations engaged in the fight against Daesh, are showing less and less interest in the fight against terrorism, preferring to focus on internal problems, like the independence movement in the Kurdish region of northeastern Syria, or Iraqi political competition in Baghdad. More broadly, some Middle Eastern countries, like Lebanon or Yemen, are characterized by a persistent fragility that could destabilize the region, although France does not have the means to resolve these internal problems.

It thus seems like a good moment to examine the appropriateness of France's current strategic posture in the Middle East. In a context of renewed strategic competition, driven particularly by Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey, how can France position itself? Other than partnerships based solely on the fight against terrorism, what can it offer? What could France's strategic ambitions in the region be, and what means could it employ to achieve them?

First, France's current strategic posture in the Middle East is inherited from a history that explains its focus on counterterrorism and security concerns. Nevertheless, the upheavals currently taking place in the area affect France and its regional partners directly. In response, France can adapt its posture by redefining its partnership policy and adopting an assertive stance toward strategic competition.

A Strategic Posture Inherited from History

Built up over several centuries of shared history, the political, cultural, religious, and linguistic ties between France and the Middle East are rich and varied. Although the colonial period and the challenges to the French Mandate during the Second World War complicated these relations for a time, Charles de Gaulle's adoption of an ambitious "Arab policy" breathed new life into the French posture. This policy consisted in offering an alternative to non-aligned countries during the Cold War, particularly by supplying arms without imposing political conditions. This posture was undermined by the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the American monopoly, which affected French exports. France's refusal to participate in the Iraq War in 2003 was thus one of the last bursts of the "Arab policy", which transformed into a crisis management approach in the wake of the geopolitical upheavals represented by the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, and the emergence of terrorism in the form of Daesh.

Although France has had a continuous military presence in the region since the 1970s with UNIFIL, and since 2009 with the French military base in the UAE, it was the fight against terrorism—and its spread into French territory—that motivated the launch of Operation Chammal in 2014, and so the intensification of France's military presence in the area. The operation has achieved its goal of limiting Daesh's expansion, but declining interest in counterinsurgency among France's local partners has enabled the militant group to maintain a resilient presence, raising the question of how appropriate the focus on counterterrorism now is. The American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the downsizing of the US's military presence in the Middle East have also highlighted the unsustainability of France's posture in its current form.

Strong, Historical Ties

France's foreign policy in the Middle East, which guides its strategic posture, is the product of historical ties going back several centuries, and in particular to the colonial and mandate periods. This policy underwent an initial shift in the 1960s as a result of Charles de Gaulle's "Arab policy". The end of the Cold War, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and finally the upheavals of the 2010s have all led to evolutions in this foreign policy. Forced to shift to a fast-paced crisis management approach, it no longer seems to have a vision for the region and changes its focus from crisis to crisis, which can make France's motivations hard to read for its partners.

An Ancient Heritage

Without going as far back as the Crusades, or even Napoleon Bonaparte's military expeditions—although those episodes do play a role in determining current ideas and perceptions—the ties between France and the Middle East, particularly the Levant, grew stronger after the First World War. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, France and the British Empire agreed to “partition” the region into spheres of influence as set out in the Sykes-Picot Agreement signed in 1916. This agreement, which has since become a symbol of Western imperialism in the region, is often caricatured as the origin of all the Middle East's woes.⁵ The real partition took place in 1920 at the San Remo conference, which allocated four League of Nations “mandates”: Lebanon and Syria to France, and Palestine and Mesopotamia (the future kingdom of Iraq) to the United Kingdom. Although these mandates were theoretically intended to “guide” the governments of the countries in question toward full independence, the two European powers treated them in practice as colonial protectorates, sometimes using violence.⁶

This arrangement did not survive the Second World War: after the rift between Vichy and Free France, popular and political opposition intensified in the protectorates. The mandate system ended with the independence of Syria and Lebanon in 1944, and then the withdrawal of French troops in 1946. Relations between Paris and the region were impaired for several years. Arab, and particularly Egyptian, support for the Algerian independence movement from 1954 contributed further to this disaffection, which reached a climax during the Suez Crisis in 1956. Forced to withdraw their forces under pressure from the United States and the Soviet Union, the French and British definitively renounced any unilateral military action in the region from then on.⁷ The episode pushed France to develop a foreign policy in the Middle East that differed from that of Washington, particularly with regard to Israel.

Since the creation of the Jewish state in 1948, France had established itself as Israel's leading military supporter and supplier of equipment, setting up a “combat alliance”.⁸ Supporting Israel allowed France to put pressure on Egypt and the Maghreb as a way to weaken the National Liberation Front in Algeria, and more broadly to hold on to an ally in the

5. J. Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2011.

6. Notable examples include the Great Syrian Revolt between 1925 and 1927, which was led by the Syrian Druze and culminated in the bombardment of Damascus by French artillery. See Metellus, “Politique de la France au Proche-Orient”, *Politique étrangère* 20, no. 6, 1955: 677–88; and E. Rogan, “The French Empire in the Middle East”, in *The Arabs: A History*, London: Allen Lane, 2009, 211–46.

7. M. Ferro, *1956, Suez – Naissance d'un Tiers-Monde*, Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2006.

8. F. Schillo, *La Politique française à l'égard d'Israël (1946-1959)*, André Versaille Éditeur, 2012.

Middle East in the face of the increasing power of regimes supported by the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This rapprochement was exemplified by the supply of high-quality military equipment: in 1955, Israel concluded a contract for the delivery of 59 Dassault *Mystère IV* aircraft, which would be used by the Israeli Air Force during the Suez Crisis and then in the Six-Day War; likewise, 79 *Mirage IIIs* were delivered between 1962 and 1968. Dassault also cooperated with Israel Aeronautics Industries to develop its *Jericho I* short-range ballistic missiles, which were based on the French *MD-620*.

Finally, the two countries also cooperated on the development of civil nuclear power, with heavy French investment in the construction of the Dimona nuclear power plant and its plutonium reactor. The first signs of a slowdown in Franco-Israeli cooperation appeared after Charles de Gaulle's return to power, which brought official cooperation on nuclear power to a halt in 1961, but the real blow came after the Six-Day War, which marked a new stage in France's "Arab policy".

The Era of the "Arab Policy"

The Évian Accords in 1962 marked the end of the Algerian War and provided the first opportunity for rapprochement with the Arab states in the Maghreb and the Middle East, while another came from the growing distance between France and Israel. In summer 1967, de Gaulle's condemnation of Israel's preventive attack during the Six-Day War and the imposition of an embargo on the belligerents marked a major change in French foreign policy in the region and ushered in the years of the "Arab policy". Deprived of French arms and embroiled in numerous disputes over equipment that had been paid for but not delivered, Israel turned permanently to the United States, a relationship that still dominates the region's dynamics.

The decline in relations with Israel and the possibility of forming new relationships with the Arab states gave France the opportunity to assert its interests in the Middle East on a long-term basis and to position itself as a "great power" with a role to play on the international stage⁹: energy independence, a rejection of bloc politics, and arms exportation. Algeria's independence forced France to turn to other sources, particularly Libya and Iraq, for the hydrocarbons that were so essential to the economic growth of the Trente Glorieuses period that followed the end of the Second World War. France's Cold War foreign policy of supporting non-aligned nations was in evidence in the Middle East, where France provided aid to Lebanon, Iraq, and to a lesser extent the Gulf states, without demanding any political

9. J. Doise and M. Vaïsse, *Diplomatie et outil militaire : politique étrangère de la France, 1871-2015*, Paris: Points, 2015, 630.

concessions in return. This allowed France to retain a degree of strategic autonomy from the United States and to increase its influence at a low cost.

This strategic autonomy was principally embodied in the arms industry, where France had a very active sales policy toward the countries of the Middle East throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The Société française d'exportation de systèmes d'armes à destination du Moyen-Orient (SOFRESA) (French Company for the Exportation of Weapons Systems to the Middle East) was founded in 1974, coinciding with the lifting of the embargo on the belligerents of the Six-Day War. At the beginning of the 1980s, 45% of French arms exports went to the Middle East. Some illustrative contracts include:¹⁰

- The sale of 110 *Mirages* to Libya in 1970;
- 32 *Mirage-5s* ordered by the UAE in 1972, followed by two lots of 18 *Mirage-2000s* in 1983 and 1985, as well as the sale of 436 *Leclerc* tanks in 1993;
- 133 *Mirage F-1s* ordered by Iraq from France between 1977 and 1987, as well as *Exocet* air-to-sea missiles and *Roland* surface-to-air missiles to help Saddam Hussein's regime in its war against Iran;¹¹
- the Sawari contract, signed in 1981 with Saudi Arabia. It concerned the sale of four frigates, two replenishment oilers, and 28 helicopters, and also included personnel training and initial technical assistance, for a total of 14 billion dollars. Other contracts concluded with Saudi Arabia since 1972 include the Shahin contract (equipment for three armored brigades).

This policy sowed the seeds for the arms industry's dependence on exports, particularly to the Middle East, a state of affairs that continues today: the domestic market, limited by a low defense budget, is not capable of absorbing the production needed to support an independent defense industry.¹² Military production and exportation are also essential for maintaining the skill level of the civil sector, particularly in aeronautics and the space industry. This dependence creates an inherent vulnerability to any slowdown in orders or the kind of political dilemmas that marked the 1990s.

This industrial activity was accompanied by the first French ground commitment in the Middle East since the Suez Crisis: France sent a contingent to UNIFIL in 1978¹³ and witnessed the emergence of the "Iranian problem" following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, a problem that still endures today.

10. J. Frémeaux, "La France et les exportations d'armements au Proche-Orient de la fin de la guerre d'Algérie à la première guerre du Golfe", *Revue historique des armées*, no. 246, 2007: 110–19.

11. "Les livraisons d'armes à l'Irak sont plus sélectives", *Le Monde*, December 25, 1987, available at : www.lemonde.fr.

12. L. Béraud-Sudreau, "La politique française de soutien aux exportations d'armement : raisons et limites d'un succès", *Focus stratégique*, no. 73, Ifri, June 2017, 14.

13. M. Goya, *Le Temps des guépards : la guerre mondiale de la France de 1961 à nos jours*, Paris: Tallandier, 2022, 61 et seq.

Table 1: List of French overseas operations in the Near and Middle East between 1962 and 2003

Country	Operation name	Year	Format
Lebanon	Daman	1978 – present	Contingent of land forces as part of UNIFIL (700 personnel)
Lebanon	Olifant	June 1982 – August 1986	Naval presence off the coast of Beirut (permanent air and sea group and amphibious force)
Lebanon	Epaulard	August – September 1982	Participation in the Multinational Force in Lebanon (850 personnel)
Lebanon	Diodon	September 1982 – March 1984	Participation in the Multinational Force in Lebanon (2,000 personnel)
Iran	Prométhée	July 1987 – September 1988	Naval presence in the Persian Gulf against Iran (6,000 personnel, the largest French naval deployment since the Suez Crisis)
Iraq	/	August 1990 – May 1994	Participation of the French Navy in the deployment of forces in Saudi Arabia and the embargo against Iraq
Iraq	Daguet	September 1990 – June 1991	Coalition against Iraq, the Fifth Republic's largest air and land commitment to date (12,000 personnel)
Iraq	Libage	April – July 1991	Humanitarian aid to Kurdistan
Iraq	/	August 1992 – March 2003	French participation in enforcing the international no-fly zone south of the 32 nd parallel

While Paris and Tehran had maintained a cordial relationship, based essentially on cultural exchange, during the reign of Mohammed Reza Shah, the theocratic orientation of Khomeini's new regime was the subject of fierce criticism from the French government, particularly after the Socialist Party gained power in France in 1981. Relations between the two countries were not made any easier by France's welcoming of numerous refugees from the Iranian opposition, some of whom were assassinated. The conflict was exacerbated by France's refusal to supply Iran with enriched uranium after 1979, despite previous exportations via Eurodif.¹⁴ The relationship continued to deteriorate during the Iran-Iraq War: Israel's destruction of the *Osirak* nuclear reactor (Operation Opera¹⁵), the construction of which had been facilitated by France, as well as previous arms contracts, pushed France to take Iraq's side. This support resulted in a series of violent actions committed on French soil by Iranian agents, but also attacks against French representatives in the Middle East, especially in Lebanon.

The Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli intervention in 1982 also had a lasting effect on French involvement in the Middle East. The Multinational Force in Lebanon, created in 1982, was targeted by one of the first suicide attacks in the history of the region in October 1983, leading to the deaths of 58 French paratroopers and 241 American soldiers in the Drakkar barracks in Beirut. Carried out by Hezbollah, the attack followed the assassination of the French ambassador, Louis Delamare, in 1981, and preceded the kidnapping of several French diplomats and journalists by the Shiite group, which was acting on behalf of Iranian interests in the area. The Lebanese imbroglio and its effect on the Iran-Iraq War had serious repercussions that reached as far as France itself, which suffered a wave of fatal attacks in the 1980s, some linked to the Palestinian movement and some to pro-Iranian groups.

In the 1990s, the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War forced France to review its role in the Middle East and find its footing in a unipolar world where its policy of offering an alternative to non-aligned nations was now less appealing.¹⁶ François Mitterrand's decision to join the international coalition sent by the United States following the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's Iraq exemplifies France's struggle to maintain an independent posture: it now had to declare war on one of its former "clients". Operation Daguet, comprising around 12,000 military personnel, was France's contribution to the 500,000-strong Desert Storm campaign. It also revealed how far France had fallen behind in terms of military capacity

14. J. Genton, *Rapport sur le projet de loi, adopté par l'Assemblée nationale, autorisant l'approbation de la Convention intergouvernementale relative à la société Eurodif*, Report no. 57, Paris, Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Armed Forces Committee, National Assembly, October 1980.

15. J. Kirschenbaum, "Operation Opera: An Ambiguous Success", *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, no. 4, 2010: 49–62.

16. Doise and Vaïsse, *Diplomatie et outil militaire*, 632 et seq.

and the deployability of its forces, triggering a series of reforms intended to modernize the French military and transform it into a permanent task force.¹⁷

France also faced difficulties in the arms export sector: between 1961 and 1990, the Middle East represented a third of French arms exports,¹⁸ with a peak of 61% in 1990. That figure fell to 21% in 1993, mostly because of the war in Kuwait and the depletion of France's clients, who were gradually turning to the United States. The end of the Cold War enabled Washington to establish itself as the sole power in the Middle East, and so an attractive arms supplier.

Despite these difficulties, Jacques Chirac tried to reignite the ashes of an "Arab policy" that had ultimately never been well defined. In his address at the University of Cairo in 1996, he stated that the policy "must be an essential part of [French] foreign policy".¹⁹ At the same time, his outbursts against Israel, as in Jerusalem in October 1996,²⁰ helped him to retain the goodwill of the Arab peoples and to maintain the image of France as a genuine alternative to the Russo-American duopoly. This position was, however, undermined by the way France toed the American line during the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (the 1993 Oslo Accords) and by France's rapprochement with the US on other international issues (particularly NATO and the Yugoslav Wars).

Occasional tensions with Washington did not, therefore, prevent France from showing solidarity with its American ally when the latter was struck at its very heart on September 11, 2001: Jacques Chirac supported the deployment of French forces in Afghanistan in the fall, although Paris's contribution was limited to a few hundred personnel.²¹ But this alignment faltered as a result of US military adventurism in the Middle East: in 2003, France's public opposition to any United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution opening the door to an invasion of Iraq represented both the climax and the swan song of the "Arab policy", the ineffectiveness of which became clear when French diplomatic action failed to prevent the US-UK intervention, which was launched without any specific mandate from the UN.

17. Particularly the creation of the Commandement des opérations spéciales (COS) (Special Operations Command) and the Direction du renseignement militaire (DRM) (Directorate of Military Intelligence) in 1992 to provide more flexible projection capacity and independent situation assessments. For more details on Operation Daguet and its effects on French defense policy, see the chapter "Un nouveau monde autour de la France", in Goya, *Le Temps des guépards*, 95–115.

18. L. Béraud-Sudreau, "La politique française de soutien aux exportations d'armement : raisons et limites d'un succès", *op. cit.*, 16.

19. P. Haski, "Un discours plein d'ambiguïtés", *Libération*, April 9, 1996, available at : www.liberation.fr.

20. A. Arefi, "'This Is Not a Method': les dessous de la video de Chirac à Jérusalem", *Le Point*, September 27, 2019, available at : www.lepoint.fr.

21. Goya, *Le Temps des guépards*, 173 et seq.

In fact, this crisis of Franco-American relations was the crystallization of more than forty years of disagreement between Paris and Washington on how to handle Iraq and, more broadly, the right policy to adopt vis-à-vis the Arab world.²² While Iraq seemed like a natural partner for France in the Middle East in the 1970s, the United States was less enthusiastic, primarily because of Iraqi opposition to the existence of Israel and the enmity between Iran and Iraq—at a time, pre-1979, when the US still considered Iran as an ally. French and US opinions converged during the Iran-Iraq War, but the two countries' treatment of Iraq differed in the 1990s. Washington pushed a hardline approach based on a strict embargo, while Paris felt that alternative solutions were available and that it was pointless to impose further sanctions on a regime that had already been bled dry—and one whose principal arms supplier was France. France's "Arab policy" thus provoked American and Israeli accusations of over-indulgence toward Arab dictators, particularly under Chirac.

Nevertheless, although what happened in 2003 is still mentioned in Baghdad as one of the foundations of Franco-Iraqi friendship, it did not have lasting consequences on Franco-American relations in the Middle East. The two countries came back into alignment on numerous issues, particularly in Lebanon: UNSC Resolution 1701, which supported UNIFIL and aimed to bring the Israeli-Lebanese conflict to an end in summer 2006, was prepared jointly by France and the US. This desire to position itself as a mediator coming to Lebanon's aid and only deploying its own forces subject to a precise UN mandate was France's last action in line with the "Arab policy" of the twentieth century before it shifted to a more erratic crisis management approach.

A Shift toward Crisis Management

Nicolas Sarkozy's rise to power in 2007 is seen as a rupture in French foreign policy. In August 2007, at the French Ambassadors' Conference, the president announced that he was a "friend of Israel" and that "the friendship between the United States and France is as important today as it has been over the last two centuries".²³ France rejoined NATO's integrated military command and boosted its contribution to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. This rapprochement with the US was also evident on the Iranian question, on which France took an uncompromising line. This shift was not necessarily preplanned, but rather it was a response to the deterioration of the geopolitical environment and the rise of international terrorism originating from the Middle East, as

22. On this topic, see F. Bozo, *Histoire secrète de la crise irakienne : la France, les États-Unis et l'Irak, 1991-2003*, Paris: Perrin, 2013.

23. "Le discours de politique étrangère de Nicolas Sarkozy", *Le Monde*, August 27, 2007, available at : www.lemonde.fr.

illustrated by a series of Al-Qaeda attacks in Europe (Madrid in 2004, London in 2005). This deterioration created the need for a new *French White Paper on Defence and National Security*²⁴ in 2008, updating a framework document whose last version dated back to 1994. In a clear sign that times were changing, the prior focus on maintaining “peace” disappeared, to be replaced by a list of threats facing France, principally terrorism, marking the return of “asymmetric warfare”.

In 2011, the Arab Spring brought about a new shift in France’s strategic posture in the region. As the weaknesses of its existing policy based on supporting stable regimes became clear, France was forced to adopt a crisis management approach. This sudden shift, which came as a surprise in diplomatic and military circles, led to several blunders that typify this period. While Sarkozy vaunted his desire to reestablish “the message and values of France, those of the Declaration of the Rights of Man”,²⁵ and appointed Bernard Kouchner, a former doctor well known for his humanitarian commitment, as minister for foreign and European affairs, France’s security response to the revolutions shaking the Arab world was misconceived. For example, Michèle Alliot-Marie, who succeeded Kouchner in November 2010, expressed her support for the Tunisian president Ben Ali just a few weeks before he was overthrown.

It was in part to compensate for this major error that Sarkozy decided to intervene in Libya to protect the population, which had rebelled against Muammar Gaddafi’s regime, long seen as an adversary of France despite the arms sales of the 1970s, and despite the remarkable rapprochement with Gaddafi initiated by the French president in 2007.²⁶ Operation Harmattan, which was under a UNSC mandate, began in March 2011 (a month after the beginning of the civil war in Libya) and ended in October with the death of Colonel Gaddafi. The operation had mixed results: although it was successful in military terms, demonstrating France’s capacity to act in “near high-intensity conflicts”²⁷, France and the United Kingdom were ultimately unable to achieve the strategic autonomy they desired, with Washington’s logistical support turning out to be indispensable. Moreover, the fall of the Libyan dictator caused by this intervention did not ultimately lead to the hoped-for transition to a democratic, peaceful Libya.

24. *French White Paper on Defence and Security*, 2008.

25. Statement by President Nicolas Sarkozy on the defense of human rights around the world, Paris, December 8, 2008.

26. This rapprochement was part of Libya’s rehabilitation on the international scene following Tripoli’s dismantling of its weapons of mass destruction program in an attempt to present the country as “responsible” in comparison with Iraq.

27. B. Erbland, “La Libye (Harmattan)”, in *Les Opérations extérieures de la France*, ed. J. Fernandez and J.-B. Jeangène Vilmer, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2020, 233–46.

Likewise, the revolution in Syria and the ensuing civil war revealed France's difficulties in assessing the situation in the region. France had to make a diplomatic volte-face to condemn Bashar al-Assad, who had been given a distinguished reception at the Bastille Day military parade in Paris in 2018, the sign of a significant improvement in relations after several difficult years marked in particular by the assassination—attributed to Syria—of the Lebanese president Rafic Hariri, a close friend of Jacques Chirac.²⁸

In light of these geopolitical developments in Levantine countries that had previously maintained close ties with France, as well as an internal balance of power in the Middle East that increasingly favored the Gulf states, France shifted its focus to the oil monarchies during Sarkozy's presidency. Several defense and cooperation agreements were signed or strengthened, clearly designating the UAE as France's preferred partner in the region: a strategic partnership with the federation was announced in 2007, leading to the establishment of the French military base in the UAE in May 2009. The emir of Qatar, meanwhile, was the first foreign head of state to visit Sarkozy after his election in 2007, despite the emirate's ambiguous position in relation to the financing of Islamist groups.²⁹

Following in his predecessor's footsteps, François Hollande made further overtures to the Gulf states, including several trips to Saudi Arabia, and pursued "defense diplomacy" with the help of numerous arms sales, most notably the showcase *Rafale* aircraft to Qatar, where he went twice during his presidency.³⁰ Nevertheless, his time in office was primarily marked by a crisis management policy regarding jihadist terrorism, which forced France to commit to new operations. In September 2014, following UNSC Resolution 2170, the president announced the launch of Operation Chammal, the French component of the multinational Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), established to fight Daesh in Iraq and then Syria.

But Hollande underestimated the United States' reluctance to intervene in the Middle East following its "pivot" toward Asia and the overall reduction in American foreign intervention under President Obama. Ten years after the Iraqi crisis, it was now France that wanted to intervene in Syria to bring about regime change, while the United States objected.³¹

28. A. Levallois, "La politique étrangère de la France en Syrie", *Revue Esprit*, no. 424, 2016: 76–85.

29. On relations between France and Qatar, see B. Barthe and G. Biseau, "France – Qatar, une amitié pleine de ressource", *Le Monde*, November 11, 2022.

30. A. Leroy, "L'armée dans la politique étrangère", in *La France, une puissance contrariée : l'état du monde 2022*, ed. B. Badie and D. Vidal, Paris: La Découverte, 2021, 118–24.

31. France very quickly supported the Syrian opposition, a move that was supposed to lead to the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad: Alain Juppé claimed in 2011 that the latter's days were "numbered", showing an optimism not shared by France's partners. The strikes proposed in August 2013 were not necessarily intended to bring about regime change, but they remain, according to François

The American—and British—decision not to strike the Syrian regime, even after Assad crossed their declared “red line” by using chemical weapons against civilians in August 2013, revealed France’s rather solitary position, and above all its inability to act without the United States, which turned out to pay little regard to France’s vexation.³² It was not until Donald Trump’s rise to power that France, the United Kingdom, and the United States launched Operation Hamilton, on the night of April 13–14, 2018, after the Syrian regime had once again used chemical weapons.³³ That operation had limited effect on the course of the war, however, especially because the French contribution was of uncertain value: although the French Air Force certainly demonstrated its deep-strike capabilities,³⁴ the French Navy’s equipment suffered various malfunctions.³⁵

Finally, Emmanuel Macron tried to position himself as part of a “French lineage” that he described as “Gaullo-Miterrandian or Chiraquian”, pointing out that “armed intervention is appropriate when it is part of a diplomatic roadmap”³⁶ and emphasizing the “multilateral game” and “dialogue”.³⁷ These efforts were renewed for his second presidential term: France was presented as a “balancing power” seeking to establish “clear-sighted, balanced, and prioritized ties of solidarity” with its partners, particularly in Africa and the Middle East.³⁸ Nevertheless, Macron’s policy still seemed to be based on day-to-day management and abrupt changes of diplomatic focus in response to the shocks affecting the region, with no real overarching vision.

For that reason, France’s “sovereignty” project for the fragile Middle Eastern states has not yet produced any results. Continuing France’s close relationship with Lebanon, Macron, who had previously played a role in the “liberation” of the Lebanese president Saad Hariri in 2017,³⁹ committed to

Hollande, “a missed opportunity that could have changed the course of the war”. See Levallois, “La politique étrangère de la France en Syrie”.

32. The word “France” appears just once in the account of the “red line crisis” published by Ben Rhodes, former deputy national security advisor to Barack Obama, while François Hollande is not mentioned at all. See B. Rhodes, “Inside the White House During the Syrian ‘Red Line’ Crisis”, *The Atlantic*, June 3, 2018, available at: www.theatlantic.com.

33. “Press Statement by the President of the French Republic on the Intervention of the French Armed Forces in Response to the Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria”, Élysée, April 14, 2018, available at: www.elysee.fr.

34. L. Berche et al., “Entre haute intensité et incertitude : l’opération Hamilton”, in “Faire la guerre. Chercher la paix. Ni la guerre, ni la paix. Maîtriser l’entre-deux”, *Cahier de la Revue Défense Nationale* 85, 2021: 38–44, available at : www.defnat.com.

35. L. Lagneau, “Syrie: la Marine nationale a tiré les enseignements des ‘ratés’ de l’opération Hamilton”, *Zone militaire*, November 3, 2018, available at : www.opex360.com.

36. Interview between presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron and the editors of Mediapart on May 5, 2017, available at: www.youtube.com.

37. Speech by the French president at the Ambassadors’ Conference on August 29, 2017.

38. Speech by the French president at the Ambassadors’ Conference on September 1, 2022. See also *National Strategic Review* 2022, 45.

39. A. Izambard, “Affaire Saad Hariri : le gros coup diplomatique de Macron face à Mohammed ben Salmane”, *Challenges*, December 5, 2017, available at : www.challenges.fr.

help manage the crisis that followed the explosion at the Port of Beirut, but he lacks the means to tackle the roots of the Lebanese problem, namely endemic corruption and the presence of Hezbollah. The end of Macron's first presidential term was marked by the Baghdad Conference and the pursuit of France's ambition to act as a mediator between regional powers, without for the moment achieving lasting stability in the country.

Finally, although interpersonal ties are undoubtedly an asset for protecting France's security interests in the region, the series of visits to Paris by Middle Eastern leaders in summer 2022 (UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain) risked reinforcing the public perception of France as a partner of authoritarian regimes, prioritizing arms sales and the fight against terrorism over respect for human rights.

A Visible Military Presence Still Centered around the Fight against Terrorism

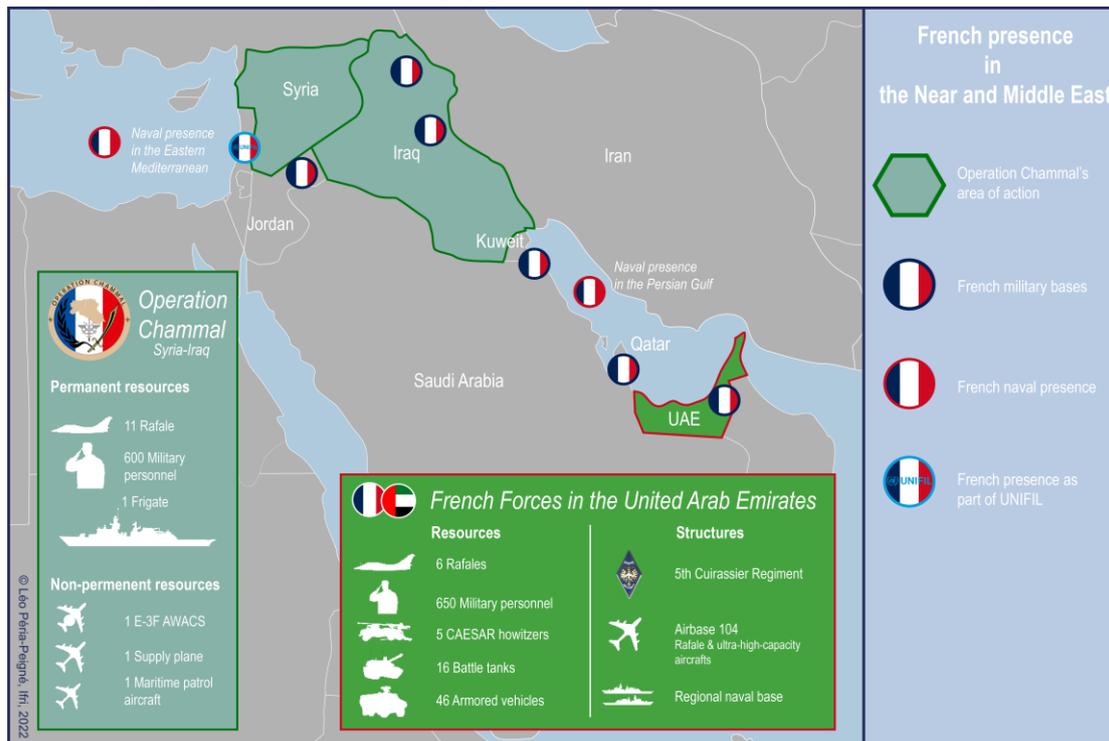
France's current strategic posture in the Middle East, which has evolved out of the changes in French foreign policy in the region, is characterized principally by a permanent military presence, albeit calibrated as closely as possible to the budgets allocated to the armed forces. As a result of the geopolitical upheavals of the last ten years, the fight against terrorism is the main justification for this military presence, as exemplified by Operation Chammal. Nevertheless, although it has had a concrete impact on the ground by significantly reducing armed violence in Iraq and Syria, this focus conceals the growing lack of interest on the part of France's partners, both regional and international, in counterinsurgency and the fight against terrorism. The international presence is vulnerable to being instrumentalized and deflected from its objective, which remains unattainable anyway because of the profound structural weaknesses of the states in question, a situation that has led to the emergence of terrorist groups and to chronic instability. These weaknesses will persist unless the problem is addressed via a more holistic approach.

The Fight against Daesh: Means and Results

Launched on September 19, 2014, Operation Chammal is the French arm of OIR, an international operation formed to respond to the Iraqi's government's appeal for help against the advance of Daesh. France is the second-largest contributor to this Coalition after the United States, both in terms of human resources and airstrikes and ground support. At its peak between 2015 and 2017, Chammal included troops from all three branches of the armed forces, as well as the special forces. The scale of the operation has been considerably reduced since then, and it is now focused on air support for operations and on training the Iraqi armed forces, with

a view to developing the bilateral relationship. This change reflects the downsizing of OIR, which entered phase 4, “Advise, Assist, Enable”,⁴⁰ in summer 2021.

Map 1: French military presence in the Middle East in 2022



Source: Léo Péria-Peigné, *Ifri*, based on data from the French Defense Staff, 2022

Chammal, a Modest Joint-Army Operation that Demonstrates France’s Commitment

The decision to deploy French troops on Iraqi territory was taken in September 2014 following UNSC Resolution 2170 and a meeting in New York where Laurent Fabius called for help fighting the “Daesh cutthroats”.⁴¹ It is a relatively small operation that allows France to show its solidarity with the Iraqi people but also to prove to the world, and to the US, that it is a reliable partner.⁴² At its peak, the French force comprised five components:

40. CJTF-OIR Public Affairs, “Advise, Assist, Enable Key to New OIR Campaign”, February 4, 2022, available at: www.centcom.mil.

41. Statement by Laurent Fabius, French minister of foreign affairs and international development, regarding the fight against the terrorist group Daesh in Iraq, New York, September 19, 2014.

42. The aim was also to ensure that the US would continue to support France in the Sahel in exchange for this strong commitment in the Levant. See the chapter “La guerre contre l’État islamique”, in Goya, *Le Temps des guépards*, 281–300.

- The Air Force, with the deployment of *Mirage 2000D* and then *Rafale* fighter aircraft, split between the Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE and the BAP H5 air base (opened in 2014) in Jordan.⁴³ This component contributed hugely to Operation Chammal’s aerial strength and to its “support” branch: France carried out more airstrikes than any country except the United States (although still only 10% of total strikes).⁴⁴ Until they were withdrawn from active service in summer 2022, the BAP H5 was also home to a number of *C-160 Gabriel* aircraft, which were used to gather signals intelligence.⁴⁵ Support for air operations was provided by personnel seconded to the Deployable Air Intelligence Center (DAIC, the Air Force’s intelligence gathering and fusion center, in the UAE), and to the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC, the command structure for Coalition air operations, in Qatar).⁴⁶
- Task forces Monsabert and Narvik, which carried out training missions between 2015 and 2020 with, respectively, the Iraqi 6th Infantry Division in Baghdad and the ICTS (Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service) special forces, with more than 28,000 Iraqi soldiers trained in total.⁴⁷
- Task Force Wagram, deployed between September 2016 and May 2019, which used CAESAR 155 mm artillery guns to support Iraqi forces in the reconquest of Mosul and then to provide support, from Iraq, for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the reconquest of the Middle Euphrates River Valley.⁴⁸
- Task Force Hydra, made up of special forces, which from 2014 helped Kurdish forces in the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and the SDF in Syria in their fight against Daesh, as well as supporting the ICTS in Baghdad and in the field. The task force consists of between 150 and 180 troops, distributed between Baghdad, Erbil, and

43. Six *Mirage 2000Ds* were deployed when the BAP was opened. They were replaced by four *Rafales* in 2017.

44. Between September 2014 and December 2020, it carried out more than 11,600 air sorties, including 1,560 strikes destroying 2,400 targets in Iraq and Syria. In 2020, 10% of the Coalition’s air missions were carried out by France. Source: P. Meyer and G. Rouillard, *Rapport d’information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient dans la perspective de l’après Chammal*, Report no. 4316, Paris, Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Armed Forces Committee, National Assembly, July 2021, 79. Likewise, a pilot deployed on Operation Chammal claimed that between October 17, 2016, and January 31, 2017, just 10% of the ammunition fired was French. Source: D. Pappalardo, “Le Levant (*Chammal*)”, in Fernandez and Jeangène Vilmer, *Les Opérations extérieures*, 275.

45. O. Cigolotti and G. Roger, *Rapport d’information sur la Jordanie, clé de voûte de la stabilité d’un Moyen-Orient en crise*, Report no. 656, Paris, Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Armed Forces Committee, July 2019, 25.

46. On the Air Force’s participation in operations against Daesh, see Michel Friedling, “Les opérations contre *Daesh* au Levant”, in “L’Armée de l’air engagée sur tous les fronts pour la protection des Français”, *Cahiers de la Revue Défense Nationale*, 2017: 33–41.

47. Twitter account of the French Chief of Defense Staff, October 6, 2021, available at: <https://twitter.com>.

48. L. Lagneau, “Irak : mission accomplie, le détachement d’artillerie français est officiellement dissous”, *Zone militaire*, May 3, 2019, available at : www.opex360.com.

northeastern Syria. As well as their partnership and support missions, they also carry out operations against high-value targets.⁴⁹

- The French Navy, with the regular deployment of the Groupe aéronaval (carrier battle group) in the Eastern Mediterranean, and more rarely in the Persian Gulf, reducing the distance the *Rafales* must fly and enabling strategic signaling.⁵⁰ The Navy also periodically deploys an *Atlantique-2* over BAP H5 for intelligence gathering purposes.

The primary objective of Operation Chammal, and more broadly of the Coalition, was to halt Daesh's advance toward the urban centers of southern Iraq and to help Iraq reconquer its territories. This objective was mostly achieved by the end of 2017 following the recapture of Islamic State's (IS) two capitals, Mosul and Raqqa, and was fully completed in spring 2019 with the recapture of Baghuz, the last bastion of the territorial caliphate. The material, financial, and human support provided to the Coalition's partner forces on the ground, particularly the ICTS and its Golden Division in Iraq, and to a lesser extent the Iraqi Kurds, was an indispensable part of this reconquest. The unintended consequence of this support was that these elite units became dependent on Western support, widening the gap between the elite forces and the rest of the regular forces, which were considered to be too unreliable for a sustained partnership. As a result, the regular forces now struggle to conduct counterinsurgency operations, for which they have not been trained: although they are able to limit the threat posed by Daesh to certain areas, they are not capable of eradicating it definitively.

A Persistent Terrorist Threat

Since losing its last pocket of territory in Baghuz in March 2019, Daesh has been treated as being in a perpetual state of "resurgence". The group still has around 10,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq, as well as sympathizers and logistical support (drivers, financial backers...)⁵¹ in Turkey. Thanks to its strong foothold in rural and suburban zones, particularly in the "security vacuums" straddling the areas controlled by the different actors in the region, the group is continuing to carry out attacks. In Iraq, its main area of activity is the territory disputed by the KRI and the Baghdad government, while in Syria it is particularly active in the Badiya Desert (center and east of the country) and on the borders between the areas controlled by the Kurds and the central government.

49. P. Meyer and G. Rouillard, *Rapport d'information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient dans la perspective de l'après Chammal*, Report no. 4316, Paris, Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Armed Forces Committee, National Assembly, July 2021, 79.

50. P. Vandier, "L'Irak (*Arromanches*)", in Fernandez and Jeangène Vilmer, *Les Opérations extérieures*, 247–58.

51. C. Bunzel, "Explainer: The Islamic State in 2021", Wilson Center, December 10, 2021, available at: www.wilsoncenter.org.

Daesh is thus able to rebuild its logistical networks for supplying the entire zone and to reestablish training camps.⁵²

In Iraq, Daesh claimed 1,116 attacks with 2,083 victims in 2021, a reduction compared to 2020 (1,405 attacks with 2,676 victims), but still a total that makes Iraq the global hotspot for the group's activity. Well established among the local population, which serves as an important recruitment pool, the group can evade most of the search and sweep operations carried out by the Iraqi or Kurdish security services. In Syria, too, the number of attacks claimed is decreasing: 360 attacks with 771 victims in 2021, compared to 593 attacks and 1,195 victims in 2020.⁵³ In both countries, the majority of attacks target soldiers or police officers, demonstrating the group's desire to avoid incurring the animosity of the general population.

Generally speaking, the persistent political and social instability in both countries hampers reconstruction and the possibility of an economic uptick, creating a vicious circle that favors the jihadist group.⁵⁴ In Iraq, the assumption of power by the Shiite majority in 2003 placed the Sunni community in a marginalized position, where it remains to this day, feeding a sense of resentment that has turned out to be a powerful tool for the jihadists to exploit.⁵⁵ Thousands of Sunnis, still equated with jihadists, are currently ostracized from Iraqi society, prevented from returning to their towns and villages, and confined in displaced persons camps, which are a breeding ground for the next generation of fighters.⁵⁶ Stability is not a realistic prospect in Syria either: more than ten years after the beginning of the civil war, the country is exhausted and fragmented between different militia groups, with no prospect of improvement or normalization. The Sunnis are also marginalized in northeastern Syria, which is controlled by Kurdish forces, encouraging pockets of resurgence to form in urban centers like Raqqa. The poor, Sunni population of southern Syria is still largely ignored by the central government and is accused of having caused the

52. I. Levy, "The Islamic State Threat in Syria Two Years After the Caliphate", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 31, 2021, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org.

53. All these figures are taken from claims published by Daesh on its various media platforms. It is important to note that the group counts wounded people as "victims": as a result, the number of people killed is much lower. There are also discrepancies between the number of attacks counted by Daesh and other organizations, particularly in Syria, where the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights lists 342 attacks against Kurdish forces alone in 2021. Source: The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, "Summary of ISIS Activity Around the Globe in 2021", January 2022, available at: www.terrorism-info.org.il.

54. There is an extensive literature on this topic. In particular, see J. Howorth, "L'Irak a-t-il jamais pu exister ?", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 82, No. 4 2017-2018; and M. Benraad, "La vengeance, ressort mobilisateur de l'État islamique", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 82, No. 4, 2017-2018.

55. On the birth of Daesh, see P.-J. Luizard, *Le Piège Daesh : l'État islamique ou le retour de l'Histoire*, Paris: La Découverte, 2015. On the specific role of the Sunnis, see M. Benraad, "Daesh, une décennie d'aliénation sunnite en Irak", *Les Cahiers de l'Orient* 121, no. 1 (2016): 37-43.

56. F. Strasser, "ISIS-Driven Displacement Remains Key Challenge as Iraq Prepares for Elections", United States Institute for Peace, June 30, 2021, available at: www.usip.org.

rebellion of 2011 and provided numerous fighters, some of whom later joined Islamist groups.

Proper management of camps for internally displaced persons, Iraqi refugees in Syria, and jihadist prisoners under Kurdish control is absolutely essential to prevent a Daesh resurgence.⁵⁷ More than 30,000 Syrians and 30,000 Iraqis considered by the Kurds to be jihadists are detained in the two main camps in northeastern Syria (Roj and al-Hol), along with around 1,000 Westerners. Mostly housing women and children, these camps (whose security is questionable) represent a challenge for the future, as do those in Iraq. Urban prisons where condemned men or those awaiting trial are held⁵⁸ are sometimes targeted by attacks aiming to free detained jihadists, such as the attack on the Hasakah prison in January 2022.⁵⁹ Any remaining foreign prisoners are also likely to be used as bargaining chips or leverage by the Syrian Kurds in their attempts to obtain financial, military, and political support from Western countries, who have thus far declined to rescue them.

As for France, two successive repatriations in July (16 women and 35 children⁶⁰) and October 2022 (15 women and 40 children⁶¹) mark an evolution in French policy regarding jihadists and a growing awareness of the risk—in both security and political terms—of remaining passive on the subject. France's refusal to carry out mass repatriations has been criticized as betraying its image as the “nation of human rights”,⁶² while states like Russia⁶³ or Kazakhstan⁶⁴ have boasted of their operations to repatriate their citizens imprisoned in the area. Given the deteriorating security situation in these camps and prisons, France now recognizes the need for repatriation in order to have these citizens “under control” in French territory.⁶⁵ Around 90 women and 220 children are still thought to be detained in these camps.

57. A. Y. Zelin, “Wilayat al-Hawl: ‘Remaining’ and Incubating the Next Islamic State Generation”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 18, 2019, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org.

58. Eleven French nationals are still being held in Baghdad and awaiting the death penalty for terrorism charges. See É. Bouvier and C. Martelet, *Le Cercle de la terreur*, Paris: Plon, 2022.

59. In late January, fierce fighting around Ghwayran prison (Hasakah), where between 3,500 and 5,000 jihadists were being held, led to the deaths of over 150 prison guards and SDF fighters. Several hundred jihadists were killed, but hundreds of others escaped, mostly to the refuge zone of Badiya, despite the intervention of US and British forces.

60. H. Sallon and C. Ayad, “La France rapatrie plus de 50 femmes djihadistes et enfants détenus en Syrie”, *Le Monde*, July 5, 2022, available at : www.lemonde.fr.

61. H. Sallon, “Le nouveau rapatriement massif de femmes et d’enfants de Syrie confirme la rupture de la France avec le ‘cas par cas’”, *Le Monde*, October 20, 2022, available at : www.lemonde.fr.

62. “La France a violé les droits des enfants français détenus en Syrie, selon un comité de l’ONU”, *France 24*, February 24, 2022, available at : www.france24.com.

63. C. Lampe, “Russia’s Repatriation of ISIS Members”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 12, 2019, available at: www.fpri.org.

64. T. Kaliyev, “Kazakh Efforts to Repatriate ISIL Fighters Should Be Replicated”, *Al Jazeera*, July 7, 2021, available at: www.aljazeera.com. See also E. Karin, *Operation: Jusan. A Story of Rescue and Repatriation from Islamic State*, London: The Momentum Publishing Company, 2021.

65. “Femmes djihadistes rapatriées: ‘il vaut mieux les avoir sous notre contrôle’, explique Laurent Nunez”, *RMC*, July 6, 2022, available at : <https://rmc.bfmtv.com>.

Terrorism, an Increasingly Low Priority for Partner Nations

Despite the continued existence of the jihadist movement, particularly in camps and prisons, the subject is no longer a central concern for the countries in the region. Terrorism is seen as a symptom of the numerous other problems afflicting Syria and Iraq, primarily the political conflicts that prevent any kind of reconstruction or stability and so ensure a constant insidious terrorist threat.

Nevertheless, these partners are well aware of the importance of terrorism as the sole justification for the OIR Coalition's mandate. This can lead to the instrumentalization of the phenomenon, with terrorism used by Baghdad, Damascus, or the Kurds as leverage with Western countries. The threat is transformed into a "security rent" for these actors, who do not hesitate to exaggerate the threat when they need additional Western support, or to downplay it when dealing with internal opposition to the presence of foreign forces.⁶⁶ When political conflicts become too serious, the foreign presence itself becomes a tool used to blackmail or negotiate. In January 2020, after the neutralization of the Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani by the United States, one of the victories of the pro-Iran parliamentary bloc in Iraq was to pass a motion—albeit a non-binding one—to expel foreign forces from the country, including French forces. The translation of these threats into action, with a series of strikes on foreign businesses in January and March 2020,⁶⁷ and the Covid-19 pandemic were ultimately more effective in achieving that departure, but the foreign presence is still an extremely important political issue.

This lack of interest in the fight against terrorism is also visible on the ground: anxious to avoid excessive losses by attacking enemies they have not been trained to fight, or even with whom they have tribal, friendship, or family ties, the local security forces (mainly in Iraq but also the Syrian armed forces or Kurdish groups) are unable—or unwilling—to implement an effective counterinsurgency approach. The training concentrated on Iraq's defense staff and ministries struggles to produce concrete results: Iraqi military culture remains sclerotic, weighed down by hierarchy, and inept when it comes to long-term planning. These difficulties are downplayed by the members of the Coalition against Daesh, who, anxious to reduce their presence on the ground, prefer to highlight their partner forces' rare successes, publicly portraying them as capable of conducting

66. Interview with a former analyst at the Ministry of the Armed Forces specializing in Iraq, Paris, February 16, 2022.

67. On the night of January 8–9, 2020, Iran fired around ten ballistic missiles against the Erbil and Al-Assad bases in Iraq, without causing any deaths among Western military personnel. Iraqi Shiite militias then launched two major rocket attacks on the Taji base on March 11 and 14, killing three Western soldiers.

high-stakes operations on the ground, retaining Western support only at the operation planning level.⁶⁸

Finally, the ambiguity around how actors are categorized as “terrorist” encourages this instrumentalization and, in certain cases, reduces the effectiveness of the international presence. For example, Turkey is actively campaigning in international bodies, particularly NATO, for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and its military arms (the Democratic Union Party [PYD] and the People’s Defense Units [YPG]) to be recognized as a terrorist threat on a par with Daesh.⁶⁹ The United States, meanwhile, sought throughout 2020 and 2021 to delegitimize certain Shiite paramilitary militias with ties to the Iraqi state. Its aim was to expand the category of “outlaw militia groups” to make them easier to target, even though they are not covered by OIR’s mandate. Likewise, the classification of Islamist groups active in northwestern Syria (the Idlib pocket), particularly Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), has been the subject of numerous negotiations that will have consequences for the role these movements will play in the process of rebuilding the country.

In response to this instrumentalization and the waning power of jihadism in Iraq, France has shifted toward developing an enhanced bilateral relationship with Baghdad. This enables it to capitalize on its reputation in the Middle East—references to 2003 are still frequent in discussions with Iraqi officials—while distancing itself, at least on paper, from the United States, whose image has been tarnished by Donald Trump’s aggressive policy and Joe Biden’s wait-and-see approach. The numerous training missions carried out by the different task forces between 2014 and 2020 (see above) have also served to persuade Iraq of the reliability of French support at the tactical and strategic levels.

With its air support in the fight against Daesh, the French Air and Space Force is the linchpin of this shift toward a bilateral relationship. Despite the downsizing of Operation Chammal, it still carries out intelligence and training missions, as well as providing support for Iraqi forces, sometimes in direct coordination with Iraqi *F-16s*.⁷⁰ The appointment in November 2021 of a liaison officer to facilitate bilateral

68. “CHAMMAL – Conseiller et assister les forces locales de sécurité pour éviter la résurgence de Daesh”, French Defense Staff, May 6, 2022, available at : www.defense.gouv.fr.

69. This approach can be seen particularly clearly in the annual assessments of the Middle East threat level issued by NATO and contributing countries. The Turkish press also made much of the “success” of Turkey’s efforts at the NATO summit in Madrid, claiming that the PKK, the PYD, the YPG, and the Gülen movement (FETÖ) had been listed as “terrorist groups” in official NATO documents for the first time in exchange for Turkey agreeing to let Finland and Sweden join the Alliance. See Merve Aydoğan and Busra Nur Cakmak, “Türkiye Says NATO Recorded PKK/PYD/YPG, FETO as Terror Groups for 1st Time”, *Anadolu Agency*, July 1, 2022, available at: www.aa.com.tr.

70. According to information published by the French Air and Space Force, between January and September 2022, the *Rafales* deployed on Operation Chammal carried out around 550 sorties.

cooperation between the two air forces and to establish the Iraq-France “air roadmap” also illustrates this refocusing on bilateral relations.⁷¹ Finally, this cooperation encompasses ambitions ranging from support to exports, with the Iraqi Air Force having shown an interest in the *Rafale* on several occasions. Nevertheless, it is still unclear what the operational benefit of the *Rafale* would be for an army that struggles to establish processes for designating independent objectives, and the Iraqi government’s statements on the matter remain vague.⁷²

Some French officers are also on the Joint Operations Command Advisor Team (JOCAT), which is tasked with advising the Iraqi Joint Operations Center (JOC – I), and on NATO Mission Iraq (NMI). This allows France to retain an inexpensive presence in the country while ensuring that the primary missions of the Western presence—the fight against Daesh and support for the Iraqi armed forces—are maintained, even though these goals are in reality becoming less and less relevant.

The End of the American War on Terror and What it Means for France

The development of bilateral relations between France and Iraq, as well as other countries in the region, is also — and above all — fuelled by a desire to make the French presence in the Middle East viable in the event of complete US disengagement. Although Macron told Iraq that France “planned to stay” with or without the United States if Iraq wanted it to,⁷³ a report by members of the National Assembly noted that it would be difficult for the French armed forces “to act militarily on the same scale without the United States”,⁷⁴ particularly in terms of logistics and infrastructure. France must, therefore, be aware of the difficulties that maintaining its presence would cause and build new, robust bilateral relationships now that the American disengagement has already begun.

Although the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in summer 2021 may appear to symbolize the end of the “twenty-year war”⁷⁵ on terror that began in 2001, it aligns with a long-established US approach of prioritizing strategic competition, particularly against China, Russia, and Iran.⁷⁶ It also

71. “CHAMMAL – Renforcement de la coopération militaire entre la France et l’Irak”, French Defense Staff, March 30, 2022, available at : www.defense.gouv.fr.

72. “L’Irak annonce avoir commandé des avions *Rafale* et des systèmes d’artillerie à la France”, *Méta-Défense*, June 1, 2022, available at : <https://meta-defense.fr>.

73. Minutes of the hearing of General Thierry Burkhard, French Chief of Defense Staff, on the 2022 finance bill, Paris, Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Armed Forces Committee, National Assembly, October 6, 2021.

74. Meyer and Rouillard, *Rapport d’information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient*, 85.

75. M. Hecker and É. Tenenbaum, *La Guerre de vingt ans : djihadisme et contre-terrorisme au XXI^e siècle*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 2021.

76. The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* stated that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security”.

reflects a certain weariness of large-scale counterterrorism operations, which appear overly expensive and of uncertain value compared to “over-the-horizon” operations using drones or rapid special forces raids.⁷⁷ Finally, the increasing exploitation of unconventional hydrocarbons within the US has made it less dependent on oil and gas from the Middle East, thus enabling this gradual disengagement.

This pivot to strategic competition and the decreasing importance of the war on terror for American foreign policy is clear in the Biden administration’s *National Security Strategy (NSS)*, which was published in October 2022.⁷⁸ The word “Iraq” does not appear once, while the countries deemed as “terrorist sanctuaries” are Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. The government states its desire to move from a “US-led, partner-enabled” policy to a “partner-led, US-enabled” one, as already demonstrated by the empowerment of local partners to carry out counterterrorism operations, even if that means occasionally embellishing the truth (see above).⁷⁹ More broadly, the NSS offers an honest account of the US’s unsuccessful overreliance on a “military-centric” policy underpinned by an “unrealistic faith” in regime change as a way to achieve US goals. The United States’ new objective is thus to move to more “practical” steps, principally freedom of navigation, partnerships, encouraging de-escalation, regional integration (best illustrated by the Abraham Accords), and respect for human rights.⁸⁰

As a result, rather than total and large-scale disengagement, the US posture seems to be more of a rearticulation. Reflecting its continued support for its Middle Eastern allies, the US remains the principal seller of arms to the region, where it was responsible for 53% of sales between 2017 and 2021. New sales to long-standing Saudi, Emirati, or Kuwaiti partners were announced in 2022 in an attempt to reassure those countries about US foreign policy’s “pivot” to Asia.⁸¹ There were 36,400 US military personnel deployed in the Middle East in 2021, a steady reduction from the peak in 2017 (46,300), but on a par with the figure from 2015.

77. M. N. Schmitt, “Over-the-Horizon Operations – Part 1: When May Force Be Used?”, Lieber Institute-West Point, December 16, 2021, available at: <https://lieber.westpoint.edu>.

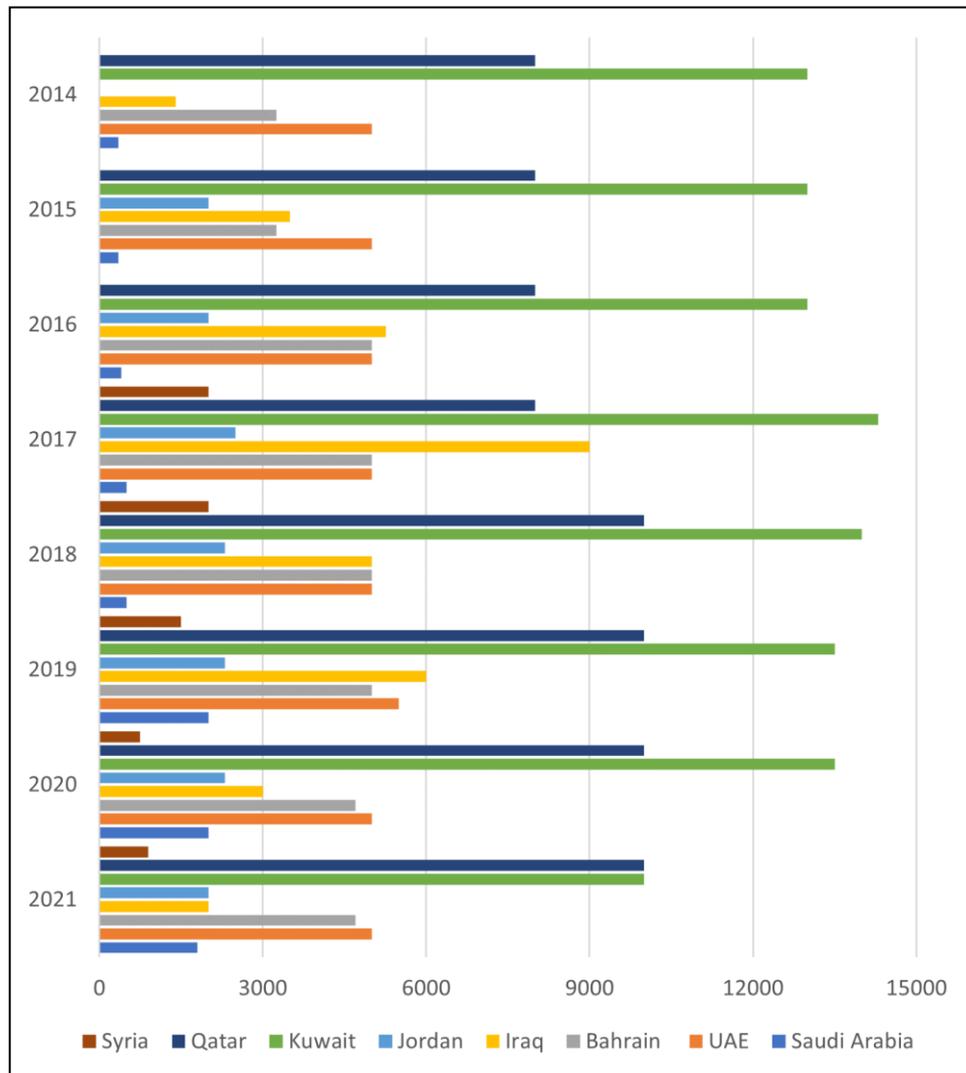
78. *National Security Strategy*, White House, October 2022.

79. This rhetoric has been used in particular by Robert M. Gates, secretary of defense under George W. Bush and then Barack Obama. See R. M. Gates, *Exercise of Power: American Failures, Successes, and a New Path Forward in the Post-Cold War World*, New York: Knopf, 2020.

80. *National Security Strategy*, 2022, 42.

81. N. Cleveland-Stout and T. Giorno, “Recent Arms Sales Contradict Biden Promise on Middle East Pivot”, *Responsible Statecraft*, February 28, 2022, available at: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org>.

Graph 1: Number of US military personnel deployed in the Middle East between 2014 and 2021



Source: *Military Balance, 2022*

Thus, despite Donald Trump’s repeated tweets throughout 2020 announcing the US’s imminent withdrawal from Iraq, and Joe Biden’s announcement that US “combat” forces would have left Iraq by December 31, 2021,⁸² the reduction of the US presence seems more like a reconfiguration of its forces and a rebranding of the arrangement. The United States still has 2,500 military personnel in Iraq,⁸³ assisted by several thousand contractors across three bases (Baghdad, Al-Assad in the Anbar desert, and Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan) that also house French forces.

82. “US Combat Forces to Leave Iraq by End of Year”, *BBC News*, July 27, 2021, available at: www.bbc.com.

83. C. Smith, “Still at War: The United States in Iraq”, *Just Security*, May 18, 2022, available at: www.justsecurity.org.

Likewise, Trump's unilateral decision to withdraw American troops from northeastern Syria in December 2018 triggered a wave of panic among the Syrian Kurdish forces supported by the Western Coalition: in response to fears of a possible Turkish offensive against the SDF or a Daesh resurgence, the decision was finally made to keep 900 American soldiers in the region to carry out missions supporting the SDF⁸⁴ or alongside the French special forces. This presence also allows the United States to conduct operations targeting senior Daesh figures, including in areas controlled by the regime.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the US's withdrawal is still a present threat in the minds of its partners, complicating the relationship between the Kurds and their various Western supporters.

France's dependence on American logistical and political support to carry out its counterterrorism operations in the Middle East seems to be the paradoxical result of several decades of French foreign policy in the region, which has long sought to establish France as an alternative to the US. Charles de Gaulle's "Arab policy" aimed to support certain Arab regimes by supplying arms on a large scale without imposing political conditions, in contrast to Washington.

The geopolitical upheavals in the region and the emergence of terrorism in the 1990s, and more broadly the end of the bloc system inherited from the Cold War, ultimately forced France to align with the United States and implement a policy of active intervention in the Middle East. Despite differences of opinion, particularly regarding the Iraq War, France stands side by side with the US, and its "Arab policy" has turned into an attempt to manage the region's increasingly numerous crises. Although the presence of the FFEAU since 2009 has allowed France to diversify its missions, for example providing reassurance regarding Iran, the fight against terror imposed itself during the 2010s as the alpha and omega of the French presence in the region, principally in the form of Operation Chammal.

Although Chammal successfully halted Daesh's expansion and limited the spread of the terrorist threat to French territory, its tight focus makes France vulnerable to changes of heart on the part of its local partners, who no longer want to participate in the fight against terrorism, and of its American partner. Although the US still retains a presence on the ground for now, it ultimately wants to focus on strategic competition, which is currently reconfiguring the Middle East, with important implications for France's posture.

84. L. Seligman, "Troops to Stay Put in Syria Even as Biden Seeks to End America's 'Forever Wars'", *Politico*, July 27, 2021, available at: www.politico.com.

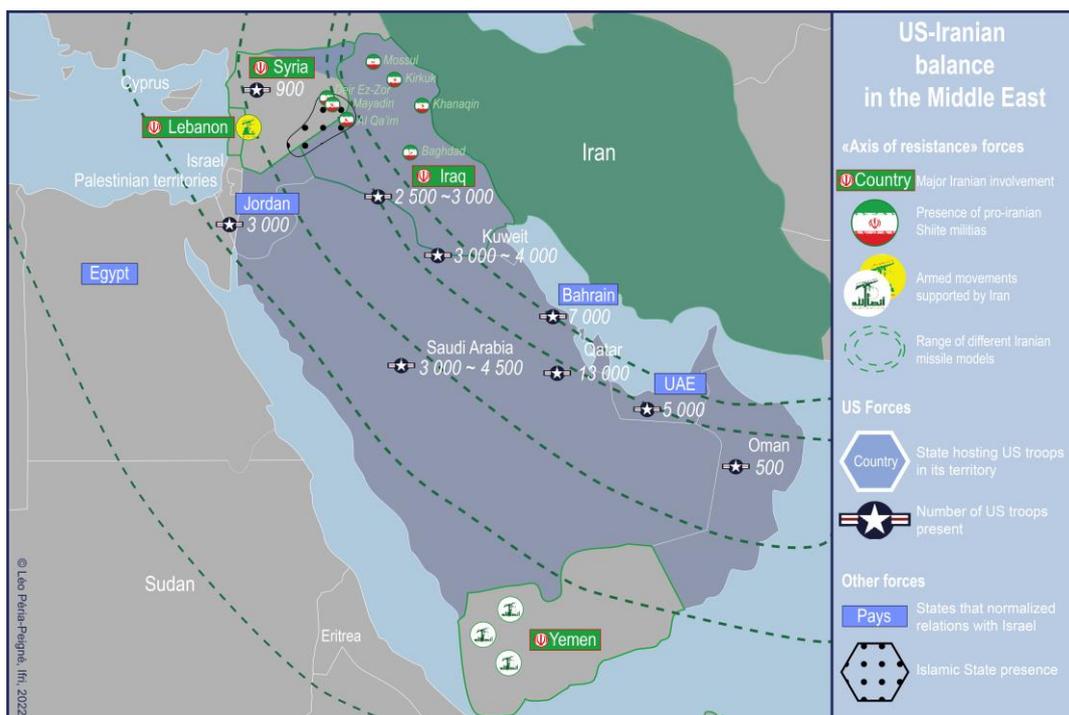
85. "Three Senior Islamic State Militants Killed in US Strikes in Syria", *The Guardian*, October 7, 2022, available at: www.theguardian.com.

A Military Presence Called into Question by the Reconfiguration of the Region

As a result of the weakening of several Arab states following the Arab Spring and the emergence of Daesh, regional strategic competition is now fierce, leading to a redefinition of alliances. Historical divides are becoming less important to local actors who are no longer hesitant to transcend ancient rivalries, forcing Western countries to establish new analytical frameworks to ensure their foreign policy remains effective.

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, seen as one of the principal drivers of regional dynamics since 1979, now seems to be up for reconsideration. In effect, although the “Shia crescent” still represents a threat to France, for example through its militias and its ballistic program, its unity is increasingly fragile, primarily because of Iran’s internal problems and its regional policy errors. Likewise, tensions within the “Sunni bloc” remain high, particularly around the question of Qatar and how to treat Israel following the signing of the Abraham Accords.

Map 2: Balance of power between the “axis of resistance” and the “axis of Abraham” in the Middle East



Source: Léo Péria-Peigné, Ifri, 2022

France's limited resources mean it is unable to increase its deployments to protect its interests amid this new strategic competition or try to fill the partial vacuum left by the United States. Its current choices seem appropriate for the time being: military partnership with the UAE, maintaining relations with the other Gulf states, economic and security investments in Jordan and Egypt. Nevertheless, these relations are already highly reliant on arms exports, which carry inherent political and economic risks, while France's partner countries also have their own structural weaknesses. Finally, there is the question of France's posture in view of the emergence of extra-regional powers that are challenging Western positions in the region, whose ties with local partners are worthy of discussion.

France Faced with the “Axis of Resistance”

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has been seen by France and most Western countries as a rival and a destabilizing force in the Middle East. In addition to numerous historical grievances, Iran currently poses threats to French and Western interests in the region. The first of these threats is the Iranian military nuclear program: taking advantage of the US's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Tehran resumed its enrichment activities and is now a “threshold state”. Moreover, it has a network of pro-Iran groups and militias in the region, united in an “axis of resistance” whose principal activities include attacks on foreign forces in Syria and Iraq, and economic and political predation on these two already fragile states. Thus, although France has traditionally taken a more moderate position than the United States regarding Iran, thanks to which its forces have avoided being targeted by attacks, the threats posed by this axis and their consequences for France must be carefully considered.

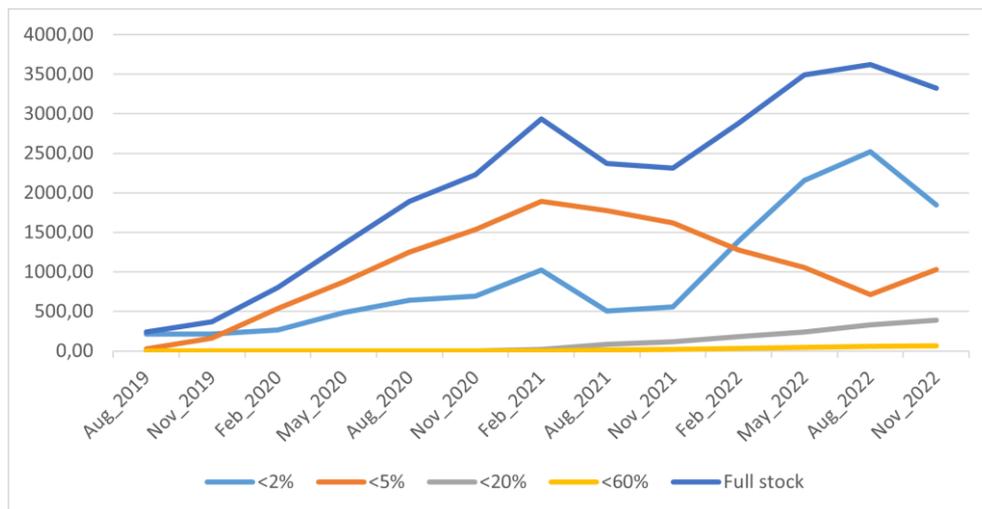
The Nuclear Impasse

Signed in July 2015 by the five permanent members of the Security Council, Germany, the EU, and Iran, the JCPOA represented the culmination of more than twelve years of negotiations aimed at curbing the Iranian nuclear program following the discovery in 2002 of uranium enrichment activities and the construction of additional nuclear sites. Initially in favor of a flexible approach and keen to limit the unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States, France's foreign policy toward Iran changed in 2007 with the election of Nicolas Sarkozy. François Hollande's rise to power did not alter this stance, seen as hard during the negotiations but proactive once the agreement was signed.⁸⁶

86. G. Beaud, “La France et le nucléaire iranien : enjeux bureaucratiques et politique étrangère”, *Politique étrangère* 84, no. 4, 2019: 153–68.

In reality, the JCPOA did not meet the expectations of France’s partners in the region, who made their feelings known: the agreement only dealt with Iran’s nuclear program and not its regional influence in the Middle East or its ballistic program, both of which are seen by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE as much more concrete and advanced threats.⁸⁷ These were the arguments used by Trump in 2018 to justify the United States’ withdrawal from the JCPOA and the reimposition of sanctions, triggering the departure of various French and European businesses that had opened branches in Iran to profit from the opening up of a major market (aeronautics, automobile, oil...).⁸⁸ In an effort to portray itself as respectful of the agreement and willing to comply with international restrictions, Iran did not immediately resume its enrichment activities: it was ultimately the neutralization of General Soleimani in January 2020 by an American drone that provoked Tehran’s ire and led to an acceleration of uranium enrichment, which has not stopped since then.

Graph 2: Uranium-235 stock in Iran over time



Source: Three-monthly reports of the International Atomic Energy Agency

Clarification: the data from the August and November 2019 reports are sorted differently from the rest. For these two entries, the quantity presented in the graph as “enriched to 2%” is actually enriched to 3.67%, while the quantity at 5% is enriched to 4.5%.

87. T. Borck and D. Dolzikova, “Chain Reactions: The Iranian Nuclear Programme and Gulf Security Dynamics”, RUSI, July 18, 2022, available at: <https://rusi.org>.

88. For example, the sale by Airbus of a hundred planes to two Iranian airlines for 8 billion euros, the agreement between Total and the National Iranian Oil Company, or PSA Peugeot Citroën’s flourishing business activities in Iran. According to an expert in trade issues in the region, it is unlikely, after this demonstration of the problematic extraterritoriality of US sanctions, that these companies will be so eager to reinvest in the Iranian market in the event that sanctions are lifted again.

The beginning of enrichment to 60% recorded in August 2021 marks a turning point in the program: even in the pre-JCPOA era, Iran never reached that threshold, which drastically reduces breakout time—the time needed to produce enough military-grade uranium (enriched to over 90%) for one nuclear weapon.⁸⁹ In summer 2022, this breakout time was estimated at a few days, whereas the JCPOA was supposed to limit it to one year: Iran is thus now a “threshold state”. The Iranian authorities themselves have acknowledged that they have the technical capacity to produce an atomic bomb,⁹⁰ although the Iranian nuclear program is officially justified strictly for the purpose of medical research and for exercising the “right to enrich”. Nevertheless, there does not currently appear to be any political will to cross the nuclear threshold, and it would take several years after a bomb was produced to miniaturize it and test ballistic vectors.

Iran’s ballistic program, meanwhile, is constantly being modernized and tested: in January 2020, Iran used *Zolfaghar* and *Qiam* missiles against Coalition bases in Iraq. Most of these missiles are now capable of reaching Israel and the heart of Saudi territory, thus explaining the strong demand in the Gulf states for reinforcement of their anti-missile defense systems. There is also a real risk that this missile capability could be transferred to its regional proxies in Iraq, Syria, or Yemen, principally in terms of short-range ballistic missiles with no nuclear payload capacity.

Table 2: Iranian ballistic missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead

Name	Type	Estimated range (km)
Shahab-1	Short range ballistic missile (SRBM)	300
Shahab-2	SRBM	500
Shahab-3	Medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM)	800 – 1,000
Qiam-1	SRBM	500
Ghadr-1	MRBM	1,600

89. S. Henderson, “Iranian Nuclear Breakout: What It Is and How to Calculate It”, *PolicyWatch* 3457, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 24, 2021, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org.

90. “Iran Nuclear Chief: We Have Technical Means to Produce Atom Bomb, No Intention of Doing So”, *Reuters*, August 1, 2022, available at: www.reuters.com.

Sajjil	MRBM	2,000
Emad	MRBM	1,600
Khorramshahr	MRBM	Over 2,000

Source: "Open-Source Analysis of Iran's Missile and UAV Capabilities and Proliferation", *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, April 2021.

The seeds of the JCPOA's failure in 2015 are, therefore, still present, underpinning current negotiations on the United States rejoining the agreement, which began in April 2021 following Joe Biden's inauguration.⁹¹ After a pause following the election of Ebrahim Raisi as president of Iran, talks resumed in Vienna in November 2021. Although European diplomats, including some French, were on the whole enthusiastic about the prospect of reaching a new agreement at the beginning of 2022, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine soon put a damper on their hopes. Russia was originally one of the drivers of the agreement, acting as a mediator between the "European bloc" and Iran, but since March 2022 Moscow has demanded that its trade with Iran be exempt from any international sanctions imposed by the UN or the EU.

This interference, initially criticized by Iran before the war improved relations between Tehran and Moscow, has been compounded by diplomats being less available than before, relegating the Iranian issue to the bottom of the list of priorities for now.⁹² To date, despite a new cycle of negotiations in summer 2022, no progress appears to have been made: in light of the protests that have shaken Iran since mid-September 2022, the United States has stated that the deal is "no longer a focus",⁹³ while talks between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) remain tense.⁹⁴ This deadlock has highlighted the relative weakness of the European powers and the impossibility of "doing without" the US when it comes to Iran, despite France's leading role in the negotiations being recognized by its partners.

Finally, Iran's pursuit of "hostage diplomacy", with the detention in November 2022 of a dozen Westerners, including seven French citizens, hampers opportunities for political dialogue and so the chances of resolving the nuclear question.

91. S. Gaillaud, "Washington-Téhéran : les pourparlers de Vienne sur le JCPOA peuvent-ils aboutir ?", *Briefings de l'Ifri*, Ifri, September 6, 2021.

92. "Nucléaire iranien : ce que change la guerre en Ukraine", *Géopolitique*, RFI, April 29, 2022, available at: www.rfi.fr.

93. A. Obel, "US State Department Says Iran Nuclear Talks No Longer a Focus for White House", *The Times of Israel*, October 13, 2022, available at: www.timesofisrael.com.

94. "Is Restoring the Iran Nuclear Deal Still Possible?", International Crisis Group, September 12, 2022, available at: www.crisisgroup.org.

Increasingly Troublesome Proxies

Besides its embryonic nuclear program and a very advanced ballistic program, Iran has other ways of promoting its ideology in the Middle East. To do so, it uses an approach seen as destabilizing by France, other Western nations involved in the region, and local actors: a network of proxies built up since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Table 2: Iran’s main proxies in the Middle East

Name	Date of foundation	Area of activity	Links with Iran	Estimated numbers	Political component
Hezbollah	1982	Lebanon, Syria	Ideological, financial (principal sponsor), material (supply of arms) since its foundation	Between 30,000 and 100,000 depending on estimates	13 seats out of 128 in the Lebanese Parliament (elections of May 2022)
Badr	1982	Iraq	Strong support from Iran during its creation, but increasing autonomy	25,000	Member of the Fatah Alliance in the Iraqi Parliament (29 seats)
Kata’ib Hezbollah	2003	Iraq	Very faithful to Iranian directives, significant financial and material assistance	7,000	Ideologically close to the Fatah Alliance but no affiliated members of Parliament
Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq	2006	Iraq, Syria	Faithful to Iranian directives, supply of arms	5,000	Member of the Fatah Alliance in the Iraqi Parliament
Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba	2013	Iraq, Syria	Faithful to Iranian directives, supply of arms	3,500	Ideologically close to the Fatah Alliance but no affiliated members of Parliament
Houthi movement	1994	Yemen	Supply of arms, possible Iranian presence in Yemen, but significant autonomy	100,000 (in 2011)	Ansar Allah
Al-Quds Brigades	1981	Gaza, West Bank	Material and financial assistance, ideological support	Unknown	Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Source: Interviews at the French Ministry of the Armed Forces; Al-Monitor; Washington Institute for Near East Policy; L’Orient-Le Jour

This Iranian presence was considerably strengthened by the upheavals of the 2010s: the civil war in Syria and the emergence of Daesh. Tehran established its status as a regional military power in 2011, when it sent regular troops alongside the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Pasdaran) to Syria to support Bashar al-Assad's regime,⁹⁵ as well as maintaining a network of informal militias in Syria and helping to structure Shiite militias in Iraq. This allowed Tehran to ensure a "logistical corridor" running from Iran to Lebanon and Syria via Iraq, through which it supplies the Syrian regime and Hezbollah with weapons. The conflict with Daesh only increased its hold: by dispatching several dozen military advisers from the Quds Force to Iraq and Syria to support Shiite militias, Iran was able to help its proxies establish themselves on a firm footing in two weak states open to economic predation.⁹⁶

In Iraq, these militias capitalized on their victories against Daesh—at the cost of numerous abuses committed against the Sunni population—to position themselves as a legitimate security and political force, enabling the "pro-Iran" bloc to win the legislative elections in 2018. Nevertheless, when the Sunni enemy was defeated in 2017, some radical militias turned to the fight against the Western presence, equated with the United States—although certain political actors with close ties to Iran have repeatedly stated that French forces would not be deliberately targeted by militias in view of France's opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁹⁷ Attacks on Western businesses in Iraq became more frequent from 2019; the attack on Camp Taji in March 2020 led to the mass departure of Coalition forces, hampering the fight against Daesh in which the Western forces were still engaged. The growing independence of Iraqi Shiite militias has thus enabled them to adopt their own security, economic, and political agendas, which do not always follow those set out by Tehran. This diminishing of Iran's influence is also in part due to the reduction in the amount of financial aid Tehran has been able to provide following the blow to the Iranian economy caused by the Covid-19 crisis.⁹⁸ Similar attacks are still being carried out today, limiting the freedom of action of Western forces in Iraq and northeastern Syria.⁹⁹

Finally, the ubiquity of militias with ties to Iran in Iraqi political life makes it more difficult to consolidate the state and the central government,

95. W. Fulton, J. Holliday, and S. Wyer, "Iranian Strategy in Syria", Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, available at: www.understandingwar.org.

96. R. Mansour and F. A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future", Carnegie Middle East Center, April 28, 2017, available at: <https://carnegie-mec.org>.

97. Interviews at the Ministry of the Armed Forces and the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs in the first half of 2022.

98. B. Haute couverture, "L'Iran, le Covid-19, les sanctions et la question nucléaire", *Note de la FRS*, no. 32, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, April 29, 2020.

99. M. Knights and C. Smith, "Making Sense of Militia Attacks in Iraq and Syria in Early 2022", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 6, 2022, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org.

a situation that is detrimental to the “sovereignty initiative” promoted by France in Baghdad, and more broadly to French security interests in a country where French forces are still deployed. Although this influence is viewed negatively by the Iraqi people, who in the fall of 2019 protested against Iranian proxies in Iraq, seeing them as partly responsible for the corruption eating away at the country,¹⁰⁰ this potential source of leverage against parties with ties to Iran is difficult to exploit because it has not transferred its momentum to the ballot box. As a symbol of this incompetence, it took a full year for the Parliament elected in October 2021 (with a majority for Muqtada al-Sadr’s ultra-nationalist movement and a badly accepted defeat for Hadi al-Amiri’s pro-Iran bloc) to appoint the new president of Iraq, Abdul Latif Rashid, who was eventually elected on October 13, 2022. The process was punctuated by serious clashes between militias from the two blocs, particularly in August 2022, leading to fears that the situation could rapidly deteriorate into an intra-Shiite conflict.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, this fracture within the Shiite movement also suggests potential ways to manipulate this bloc, which turns out to be less homogeneous than it appeared, for example by using so-called “Sistanist” militias, which are non-politicized, have close ties to the Iraqi army, and are opposed to Iranian influence in Iraq.¹⁰²

In Lebanon, the strong influence of Hezbollah, Iran’s long-standing proxy in the Mediterranean, is also detrimental to France’s efforts to ensure the sovereignty and stability of the country. Beyond the historical ties between Paris and Beirut, France has had a military presence in the country since 1978 in the form of Operation Daman,¹⁰³ the French component of UNIFIL. This UN mission comprises 10,000 peacekeepers, including almost 700 from France, mainly based in Deir Kifa.¹⁰⁴ This commitment means a French general is able to hold the post of UNIFIL chief of staff. France also presents the operation as a way to “express its solidarity with Lebanon”¹⁰⁵ and to continue its strategic relationship with this long-standing partner, although the efficacy of this UN operation compared to, say, a bilateral relationship, is open to question.

In effect, UNIFIL is hampered by the structural weaknesses of the Lebanese state, itself plagued by corruption and the influence of Hezbollah,

100. A. Ibrahim, “Why Are Iraqi Protesters Targeting Iranian Buildings?”, *Al Jazeera*, November 29, 2019, available at: www.aljazeera.com.

101. H. Sallon, “La crise politique plonge l’Irak dans la violence”, *Le Monde*, August 30, 2022, available at : www.lemonde.fr.

102. M. Knights and H. Malik, “How the United States Should View Iraq’s Shrine Militias”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 5, 2021, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org.

103. More precisely, “Daman” is the name of the French contingent within UNIFIL 2, reinforced in 2006 after the war between Israel and Lebanon.

104. As of August 28, 2022, the principal contributor was Indonesia (1,106 peacekeepers), followed by Italy (1,055) and India (895). Source: <https://unifil.unmissions.org>.

105. Meyer and Rouillard, *Rapport d’information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient*, 56.

which hampers the proper functioning of the mission. UNIFIL is also subject to manipulation by regional and international actors, particularly when its mandate is renewed: Israel and the United States want to bolster its role to deal with Hezbollah and increasing militarization, while Lebanon and the UN are opposed to the idea, judging that it can effectively fulfill its mandate with the currently available means. Neither does the training of the Lebanese Armed Forces seem to be bearing fruit, with the situation seen as “critical” and a “reduction of their operational capacity”: they are now apparently unfit to carry out their defense and security mission.¹⁰⁶ As a result, France’s involvement in UNIFIL must be questioned in light of the limited benefits it brings.

Operation Amitié, launched following the explosion in the Port of Beirut, was another attempt by the French armed forces to help Lebanon address its structural shortcomings and prevent a deterioration of the situation. The operation was a success in humanitarian terms: the French forces reacted quickly and were able to rapidly deliver humanitarian aid and military engineers (750 military personnel and 1,200 tons of humanitarian cargo in a two-week operation¹⁰⁷). Nevertheless, France’s ability to influence the political process remains weak, despite a discourse of openness that has succeeded in arousing some enthusiasm among the Lebanese people, who have grown tired of Hezbollah, but less among the political elite.

In Syria, meanwhile, Iran’s support for Assad’s regime has posed an obstacle to the realization of France’s objectives since the beginning of the civil war, namely the departure of the Syrian president and a transition to a democratic regime. The relationship between Tehran and Damascus goes back a long way: as the only Arab country to support Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, Syria benefits from Iran’s continued assistance in supplying arms to neighboring Hezbollah, and the two states signed a defense treaty in 2008. Since 2011, Iran has supplied Assad’s regime with military equipment (tanks, short-range ballistic missiles, fighter-bombers...), funds (6 to 35 billion dollars per year depending on the estimates), and troops (Pasdaran advisors, but also regular army troops and militia fighters), helping him to cling on to power albeit without full control over his territory. Nevertheless, this support was not sufficient to prevent the resurgence of rebel forces and then the emergence of Daesh in 2014, forcing Syria to appeal to Russia despite the hostility between Moscow and Tehran, and so reducing the benefits the Shiite regime hopes to reap from its involvement in Syria.¹⁰⁸

106. *Ibid.*, 59.

107. *Ibid.*, 49.

108. G. Golshiri, “Entre l’Iran et la Syrie, des lendemains économiques qui déchantent”, *Le Monde*, March 19, 2021, available at : www.lemonde.fr.

Iran is also involved in the Astana peace talks, a diplomatic process between Iran, Russia, and Turkey that parallels the Western-led Syrian peace process. Five years after its launch in 2017, the Astana process has yet to produce any solutions: it primarily enables its parties to establish their domination over Syria, thus slowing down its reconstruction and gradually excluding Western countries—including France—which are not currently considering any normalization with Assad’s regime, although the latter seems likely to be around for some time.

Finally, Iran has played an important role in supporting the Houthi movement in Yemen for the last twenty years, especially since the group has gained ground in the Yemeni Civil War. Yemen occupies a strategic position for controlling the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Tehran supplies the Houthis with weaponry, in particular ballistic missile components and drones,¹⁰⁹ as well as technical support, although it is not involved in Yemen to the same extent as it is in Syria, Iraq, or Lebanon. The Pasdaran have repeatedly denied being associated with the movement, while they do not hide their ties to Hezbollah or certain Shiite militias in Iraq.¹¹⁰ The Houthis’ actions in the Arabian Peninsula are thus a double-edged sword for Tehran: while Yemeni attacks on the Gulf states (missiles fired at the UAE in January 2022, drone strike on Riyadh in June 2020) serve Iran’s strategy of combating Saudi hegemony in the Middle East, an over-ambitious operation using clearly Iranian weapons could backfire on Iran and risk provoking retaliatory strikes on Tehran, which would be perceived as the sponsor.

It thus appears that the “Shia crescent”¹¹¹ that King Abdullah II of Jordan was worried about in 2004 has acquired a certain territorial reality thanks to the Syrian civil war and the fight against Daesh, but that its heterogeneity hampers Iran’s regional ambitions. The axis of resistance fostered by its proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen is gradually becoming more independent and prioritizing its own interests, which sometimes conflict with Tehran’s stated policy of reducing the risk of retaliatory strikes on its own territory. Nevertheless, the axis remains a real threat, particularly with regard to the sovereignty of the states concerned and the broader stability of the Middle East, and Iran is well aware of its proxies’ weaknesses: both factors are compelling the countries in the region to create more forums for dialogue¹¹² and form their own alliances.

109. T. Juneau, “Comment l’Iran a intégré les Houthis dans ses chaînes mondiales de prolifération”, *Le Rubicon*, March 3, 2022, available at : <https://lerubicon.org>.

110. M. Knights, A. al-Gabarni, and C. Coombs, “The Houthi Jihad Council: Command and Control in ‘the Other Hezbollah’”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2022, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org.

111. L. Louër, “Déconstruire le croissant chiite”, *Revue internationale et stratégique* 76, no. 4, 2009: 45–54.

112. Since 2021, Iran and Saudi Arabia have held a series of bilateral meetings, some led by Iraq. But this rapprochement has been hampered by the war in Ukraine.

France and the “Axis of Abraham”: Distance or Rapprochement?

Signed in the fall of 2020, the “Abraham Accords”¹¹³ embody the regional response to Iran’s “axis of resistance”, but also Washington’s response to Tehran, given that they were driven and facilitated by the United States. They also indicate a shift in the strategic balance of the region toward the Arabian Peninsula, making the Gulf states the dominant force in the area.¹¹⁴ France anticipated this shift in the center of gravity and has been focusing its efforts on the Gulf states, particularly the UAE, for several years. This normalization also puts an end to the unique status of Egypt and Jordan, two of France’s long-standing partners in the Middle East, who had based part of their foreign policy on the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This raises the question of the future of these countries and of France’s position regarding this Israel-Gulf axis.

The Abraham Accords: A Still Fragile Creation

Seen as one of the rare successes achieved by Donald Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, in terms of foreign policy in the Middle East after the failure of the Israeli-Palestinian peace plan, the Abraham Accords are part of the United States’ policy of empowerment, reassurance, reconciliation, and integration for its regional partners. For the first time, Washington managed to unite some of its regional partners against a shared Iranian threat and to bring together two strands of US diplomacy: unflinching support for Israel on the one hand, and for the Gulf monarchies on the other.¹¹⁵

This need for decentering was also motivated by the numerous hiccups encountered by the United States in the Gulf, particularly concerning Saudi Arabia. It was not until summer 2022, more than eighteen months after his inauguration, that President Biden made his first visit to the Middle East, a tour that ended with no particular announcements and a sense of incompleteness.¹¹⁶ Following the decision by OPEC+ to limit oil production in October 2022, raising inflation in the United States amid an already tense political atmosphere, the American president once again expressed his disagreement with Saudi Arabia and announced a need to “rethink” the

113. Officially the “Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization Between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel” and the “Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic and Friendly Relations” between Israel and Bahrain. Relations have also been normalized between Israel and Morocco and Sudan.

114. A. Yossef, “The Regional Impact of the Abraham Accords”, Modern War Institute at West Point, March 2021, available at: <https://mwi.usma.edu>.

115. Élisabeth Marteu, “Israël et les pays du Golfe : les enjeux d’un rapprochement stratégique”, *Études de l’Ifri*, Ifri, January 2018.

116. A. D. Miller and D. C. Kurtzer, “Biden’s Brief Middle East Pivot Won’t Last”, *Foreign Policy*, July 19, 2020, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

relationship between Washington and Riyadh, a sign of a growing disinterest in the country despite a defense relationship still buoyed by arms sales.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, this snub was not sufficient to push Riyadh toward normalizing its relations with Israel, despite the latter's efforts,¹¹⁸ especially because of the likely opposition among its religious elites to any abandonment of the Palestinian cause.

The Abraham Accords are symbolically charged, representing both the reduced importance of the Palestinian cause in the Arab world and the realism of the Gulf states, who see Israel as a reliable political, economic, and even military partner, disregarding its image as oppressor of the Palestinian people. This perception is, however, still widespread among the working-class populations of the countries in question, having been promulgated for decades by the Arabic-speaking media. It also features in the rhetoric of Iran and Turkey, which have described the accords as a betrayal of Muslims and the Palestinian cause.¹¹⁹ In an attempt to reassure the public, Abu Dhabi verbally condemned Tel Aviv following clashes in Jerusalem in the run-up to the Negev Summit.¹²⁰ Tensions around security matters remain high: an attack committed on the day of the summit was claimed by Islamic Jihad, which cited “the summit of humiliation and shame in the occupied Negev” as justification for its action.¹²¹

This obstacle should, however, become less insurmountable as relations between the countries diversify and the benefits for the Gulf states of a relationship with Israel become clear. In its first months, the alliance focused on economic and development issues: Israel and the Gulf states are facing numerous common problems, including water management, the fight against global warming, and desertification. On the economic side, trade between Tel Aviv and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), already considerable, is set to grow, particularly in new technologies and cybersecurity: some of the Gulf states are among the buyers of the Pegasus spyware, produced by the Israeli firm NSO and used by Israel to increase its influence abroad.¹²²

Cyber is thus a gateway to increased military cooperation, the first signs of which can already be seen. Arms sales between Israel and its new

117. N. Ebrahim and A. Al Lawati, “As the US-Saudi Oil Spat Intensifies, What Are Biden's Options?”, *CNN*, October 14, 2022, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com>.

118. D. Avis, “Israel Says Talking to US, Gulf on How to Forge Ties with Riyadh”, *Bloomberg*, May 30, 2022, available at: www.bnnbloomberg.ca.

119. M. Behraves and H. Azizi, “Israel's Peace Deals Are a Strategic Nightmare for Iran”, *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2020, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

120. J.-L. Samaan, “Until Israel Deals with the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, It Can't Lead in the Region”, *Atlantic Council*, May 23, 2022, available at: www.atlanticcouncil.org.

121. A. Boxerman, “Islamic Jihad Says Hadera Attack ‘in Response to the Summit of Humiliation and Shame’”, *The Times of Israel*, March 27, 2022, available at: www.timesofisrael.com.

122. M. Srivastava, “How Israel Used NSO Spyware as Diplomatic Calling Card”, *Financial Times*, July 21, 2021, available at: www.ft.com.

partners have risen sharply,¹²³ and even previously taboo subjects are now being addressed: in summer 2022, the Israeli anti-missile and anti-drone system *Barak-8*, which has a range of 150 km, was deployed in the UAE, in addition to the purchase of the Israeli air defense system SPYDER.¹²⁴ As well as signaling to Western nations, including France, that they are not supplying sufficient anti-missile defense supplies, this deployment also represents a clear break from the caution previously displayed by the Gulf states, which had been careful to avoid any sensitive movements of weapons likely to transform the strategic balance with Iran.¹²⁵

Outside the industrial sector, military cooperation remains modest: although Israel and Bahrain signed a memorandum of understanding focused on intelligence sharing, military training, and cooperation between defense industries in February 2022, and although joint exercises involving the Emirati, Israeli, and Bahraini navies have been conducted under American supervision,¹²⁶ there are no plans for a mutual defense agreement.¹²⁷ Likewise, although the Abraham Accords were conceived as bilateral agreements with no claim to normalizing the Middle East as a whole, the absence of Saudi Arabia and Qatar remains a weak spot in the new regional dynamic created by the agreements. The time has not yet come for a robust “axis of Abraham”, and even less for a “Middle Eastern NATO” along the lines of the Middle East Strategic Alliance desired by Donald Trump and called for by Naftali Bennett during his visits to the Gulf.¹²⁸

The Gulf states, France’s Priority Partners in the Axis

Within this slightly shaky “axis of Abraham”, France’s main partners are the Gulf states, and particularly the United Arab Emirates. France tries to offer these countries security guarantees in the space left by the United States, essentially in the form of intense cooperation on arms sales. This exports-based policy is not new and involves risks. Finally, the post-oil question has implications for the durability of both the strategic partnership and the power of the Gulf states.

123. D. Avis, “Israel’s ‘Abraham Accords’ 2021 Defense Exports Hit \$791 Million”, *Bloomberg*, April 12, 2022, available at: www.bloomberg.com.

124. A. Scharf, “Satellite Images Reveal UAE Deploys Israeli Barak System Against Iranian Missiles, Drones”, *Haaretz*, October 28, 2022, available at: www.haaretz.com.

125. Interview with a researcher specializing in the area, Abu Dhabi, May 12, 2022.

126. “UAE, Bahrain, Israel and U.S. Forces in First Joint Naval Drill”, *Reuters*, November 11, 2021, available at: www.reuters.com.

127. “Israel’s Defense Minister Gantz Meets Bahrain’s King, Signs Historic Security Deal”, *Haaretz*, February 3, 2022, available at: www.haaretz.com.

128. “Naftali Bennet rêve d’un OTAN des pays du Golfe avec Israël pour contrer l’Iran”, *Middle East Eye*, March 14, 2022, available at: www.middleeasteye.net.

A Significant but Single-Partner Military Presence

Thanks to a long-standing relationship that has given rise to a series of bilateral agreements (defense cooperation in 1971, military and arms cooperation in 1991, defense cooperation in 1995, and defense agreement in 2009¹²⁹), the UAE is France's mainstay in the Middle East. Deployed since 2009, the French Forces in the United Arab Emirates (FFEAU) are split across three locations, which together form the "French base in the United Arab Emirates"¹³⁰ and are positioned within the "arc of crisis" described in the 2008 *French White Paper on Defence and National Security*:

- ▀ BA 104, part of the Emirati Al Dhafra Air Base, which hosts the *Rafales* used in Operation Chammal, among other missions. It is also home to most of the Emirati air force's fighter aircraft and the US 380th Air Expeditionary Wing.
- ▀ A naval base in Mina Zayed Port, Abu Dhabi, home to the commander of the FFEAU (COMFOR FFEAU), who is also the commander of the maritime forces in the Indian Ocean (ALINDIEN), and his general staff. The French Navy has no ships docked there on a permanent basis, but the port has enough space for the entire French fleet, except the aircraft carrier (which can use the commercial port).
- ▀ A land base within Zayed Military City, occupied since 2016 by the 5th Cuirassier Regiment under the combined arms tactical group. It houses a lot of equipment (Leclerc tanks, VBCI, CAESAR...), primarily for export purposes, as well as the Centre d'entraînement au combat et d'aguerrissement du Moyen-Orient (Middle East Combat Training and Hardening Center).¹³¹

In addition to supporting exports, the French military presence in the UAE has also deepened the bilateral relationship with the federation, now considered "France's primary military partner in the Middle East".¹³²

Paris was able to demonstrate the reliability of this partnership in February 2022: when several Houthi ballistic missiles were fired at Abu Dhabi, France responded immediately by deploying additional *Rafales* to carry out air patrols, and then by installing a *Crotale NG* surface-to-air

129. N. Goulet, *Rapport sur le projet de loi autorisant l'approbation de l'accord entre le Gouvernement de la République française et le Gouvernement des Émirats arabes unis relatif à la coopération en matière de défense ainsi qu'un échange de lettres*, Report no. 724, Paris, Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Armed Forces Committee, French Senate, July 2011.

130. É. Tenenbaum, M. Paglia and N. Ruffié, "Confettis d'empire ou points d'appui ? L'avenir de la stratégie française de présence et de souveraineté", *Focus stratégique*, no. 94, Ifri, February 2020, 63–64.

131. The only French military installation that can reproduce desert combat conditions, the Center is used primarily to prepare troops for deployment to the Sahel.

132. Meyer and Rouillard, *Rapport d'information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient*, 60.

defense system with a range of 13-15 km in the UAE.¹³³ Although welcomed by the UAE, this gesture was modest compared to the reaction—less prompt but more highly anticipated and seen as the only credible one—of the United States,¹³⁴ which has a significant surface-to-air defense system in the country (THAAD and Patriot systems). Thanks to the UAE's geographical proximity to Iran, France's presence there also serves to broaden the spectrum of French operations in the field of power competition; there are plans to cooperate on intelligence with the federation in the future. The UAE also serves as a platform for projection to other nearby zones, as shown by the airlifts sent from the UAE to evacuate French nationals from Afghanistan (Operation Apagan).

Finally, Operation Agénor, the French component of the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH), is run from the UAE, reinforcing its importance as France's regional command center in the Middle East. This mission, launched in 2019 to deal with the deteriorating security situation in the Strait of Hormuz, brings together eight European nations¹³⁵ for the principal purpose of surveilling maritime activity in the area and performing an independent assessment of the situation.¹³⁶ Although there are sometimes rivalries between EMASoH and the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), created at the same time under US auspices and involving European and Middle Eastern countries,¹³⁷ the missions of the two bodies are different and complementary. The IMSC is seen as acting at the top end of the spectrum against Iran, while French officers on the ground see EMASoH as an operation to make the European presence in the region more visible and to support vessels in transit.¹³⁸

France also has a presence in the other Gulf states, albeit a more minor one. As well as the French personnel in the general staffs of the OIR Coalition in Kuwait and Qatar, who report to Operation Chammal, French military advisors and cooperation officers are also present in Saudi Arabia. There are several reasons for this reduced presence¹³⁹: first, a lack of personnel means France must focus on a single location; second, France's

133. B. Barthe and E. Vincent, "La France en soutien des Émirats arabes unis face aux houthistes", *Le Monde*, February 5, 2022, available at : www.lemonde.fr.

134. The United States deployed *F-22s* three weeks later, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken offering his "apologies" to Mohamed bin Zayed for this tardy response. Source: M. G. Hernandez, "US Apologized to UAE for Delayed Response to Houthi Attacks: Report", *Anadolu Agency*, April 13, 2022, available at: www.aa.com.tr.

135. Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal.

136. Ministry of the Armed Forces, operation web page, "EMASoH – AGENOR", available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

137. Albania, Bahrain, Estonia, Lithuania, Romania, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

138. Interview at the FFEAU, Abu Dhabi, May 2022.

139. Interviews at the Ministry of the Armed Forces and various defense manufacturers during the first half of 2022.

strategic competitors have made more headway in other Gulf countries. Oman is seen as the “private preserve” of the UK, while the significant American presence in Qatar, which is home to the largest American base in the Middle East (10,000 personnel), seems to explain the minimal French presence there—even though there is also a significant US contingent in the UAE. Nevertheless, political sensitivity also plays a role in Qatar, whose regional position remains fragile despite its apparent reconciliation with the GCC in 2021.

There has been a noteworthy development in recent months in terms of France’s desire to diversify its partnerships in the Gulf: a strategic dialogue with Kuwait was launched in 2022 based on the model of the Qatari higher military committee.¹⁴⁰ The French foreign minister visited Kuwait at the end of March, against the backdrop of France’s need to diversify its hydrocarbon supply in response to the war in Ukraine and the slowdown of production in Russia.¹⁴¹ There is also a plan to deploy French police officers and anti-drone technologies in Qatar for security at the FIFA World Cup (see below).

A Relationship Driven by Arms Exports

Although France’s military presence is thus largest in the UAE, without such strong strategic relationships with the other Gulf states, its arms industry is active in all the countries in the region. The “gateway” provided by sales, as well as maintenance in operational condition (MOC) and training contracts, allows France to form partnerships through military equipment, some of which have been tried and tested on the battlefield.

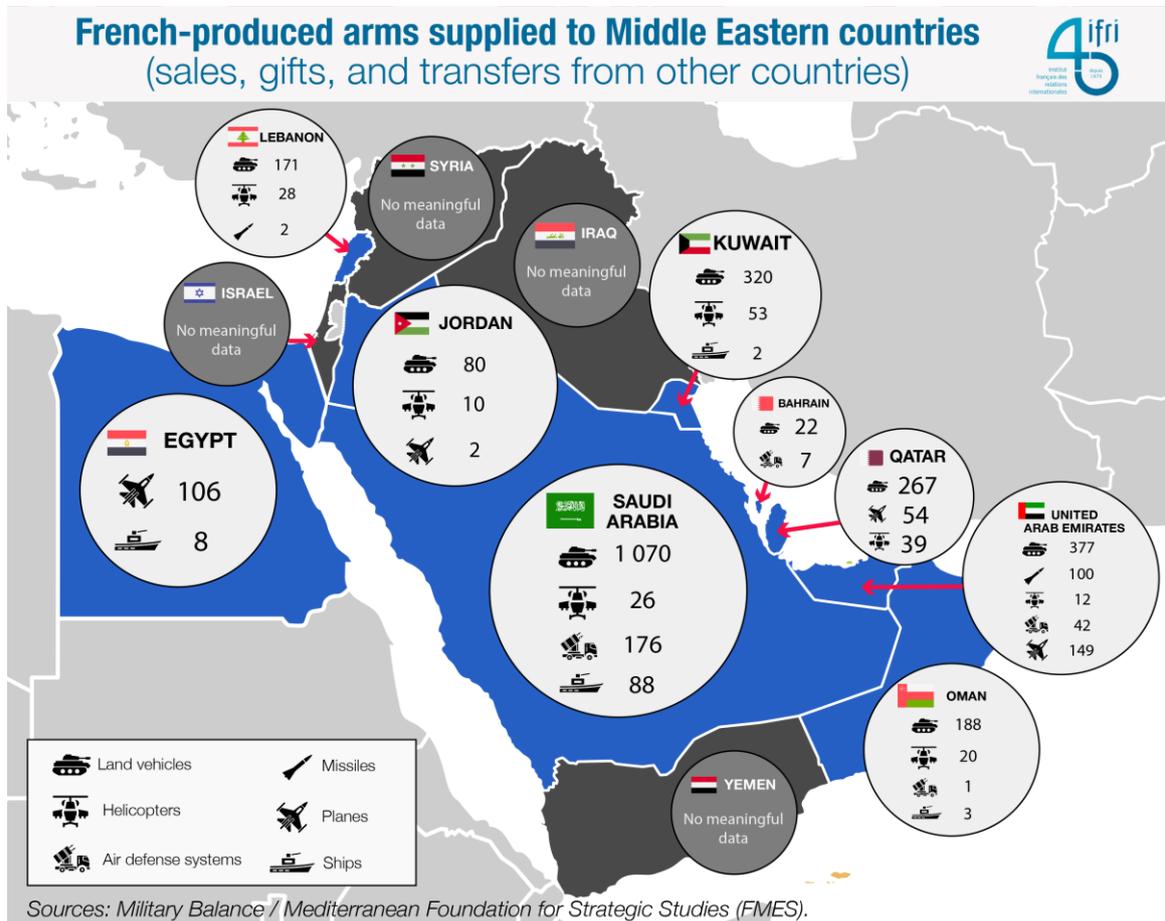
Since 1991, four of the five biggest buyers of French arms have been Middle Eastern countries, with a significant increase in exports between 2010 and the present day: Saudi Arabia (16.83% of exports between 1991 and 2020), the UAE (10.81%), Egypt (5.38%), and Qatar (5.11%).¹⁴² These contracts cover a wide variety of equipment: Leclerc tanks, VABs (armored personnel carriers), light transport vehicles, frigates, corvettes, patrol boats, radar equipment, air defense systems, fighter planes, or transport planes.

140. French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, “Koweït – Première session du dialogue stratégique franco-koweïtien”, January 2022, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

141. French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, “Golfe – Déplacement du ministre de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères au Qatar, en Oman et au Koweït”, March 2022, available at : www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

142. The only country in the top five not in the Middle East is India, which owes its place to the “Rafale contract” and the sale of *Scorpène*-class submarines. Source: J. Droff and J. Malizard, “En graphiques : les exportations d’armes françaises”, *The Conversation*, January 5, 2022, available at : <https://theconversation.com>.

Map 3: French-produced arms supplied to Middle Eastern countries (sales, gifts, and transfers from other countries)



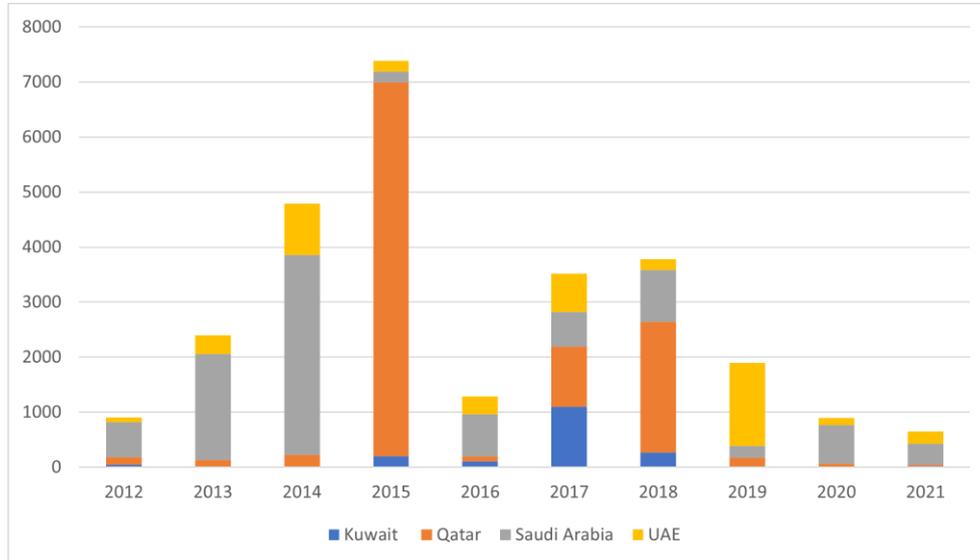
Source: Military Balance/Fondation méditerranéenne d'études stratégiques (FMES)

These figures and the “large contracts” that help to boost them are often hailed as major successes by French leaders, thereby linking France’s strategic posture in the Middle East to these sales. The Ministry of the Armed Forces welcomed the “major result of the partnership” between the UAE and France in December 2021, when a contract was signed for the sale of 80 *Rafale* fighter aircraft in the amount of 16 billion euros.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that while France is the third-largest arms exporter in the world, behind the United States and Russia,¹⁴⁴ it is still massively overshadowed by the United States, especially in the Middle East.

143. “Les Émirats achètent 80 avions *Rafale* à la France, Florence Parly salue un contrat ‘historique’”, *France 24*, December 3, 2021, available at : www.france24.com.

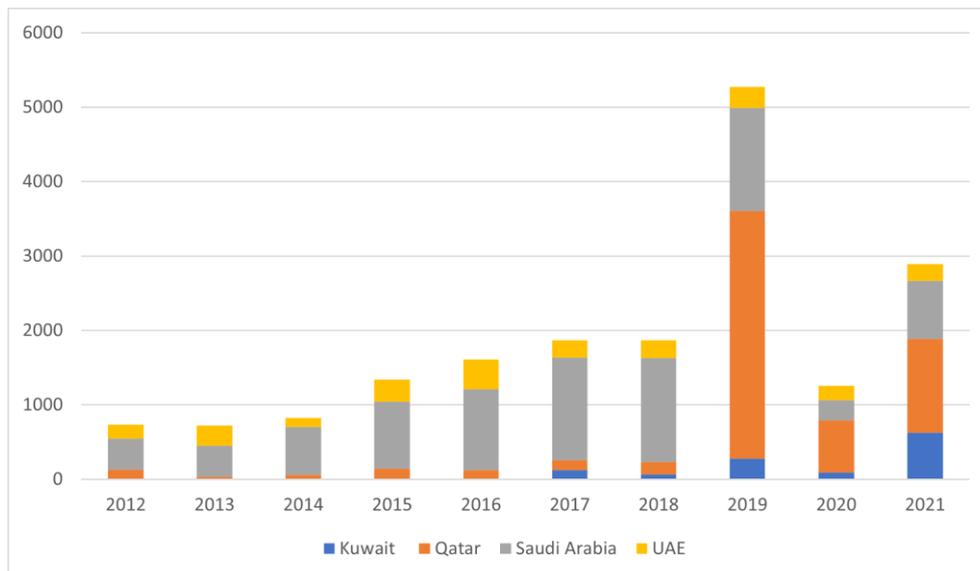
144. A. Kuimova, S. T. Wezeman, and P. D. Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2021”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2022.

Graph 3: Arms ordered from France by the Gulf states between 2012 and 2021 (excluding the *Rafale* contract with the UAE), in current euros (million)



Source: Export reports presented to the French Parliament

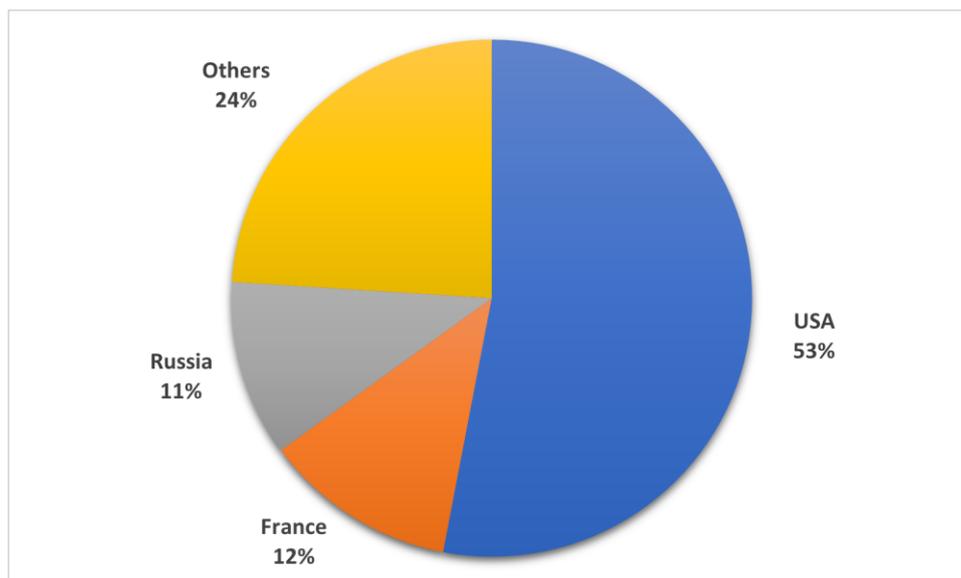
Graph 4: Arms delivered by France to the Gulf states between 2012 and 2021, in current euros (million)



Source: *Ibid.*

Thus, although the UAE has been France’s second-biggest client since 1991, French equipment only represented 6.2% of the arms imported by Abu Dhabi between 2017 and 2021.¹⁴⁵ Sales have become the arena for competition, primarily with the United States, still the primary exporter to the region, but also with Turkey, the Netherlands, Italy (Fincantieri, Leonardo), Spain (Navantia), and to a lesser extent Israel, which is capitalizing on the favorable geopolitical environment in the wake of the Abraham Accords to position itself in certain key niches, like cybersecurity or drones.¹⁴⁶ This tense competition reverses the power balance: buyers can choose between a multitude of sellers who all want a piece of this booming market, enabling them to force prices down and demand greater political concessions.¹⁴⁷

Graph 5: Countries that supplied the most arms to Middle Eastern countries between 2017 and 2021



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

This diversification of competitors may, therefore, lessen France’s ability to export to the Middle East, and, given the correlation between arms sales and relations with recipient countries, it risks weakening France’s strategic posture. In fact, it is sometimes difficult to tell whether a French overseas strategic establishment was rendered possible by arms

145. During this period, the United States led with 61% of imports, followed by France with 6.2% and Russia with 5.3%. Source: Kuimova et al., “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2021”.

146. Elbit Systems, an Israeli company known for its drones, announced the creation of a subsidiary in the UAE in 2021.

147. Emma Soubrier, “La place de la France à l’international au prisme de ses partenariats stratégiques : les cas du Qatar et des Émirats arabes unis (EAU)”, *Les Champs de Mars* 30, no. 1, 2018: 181–90.

sales to the host country, or whether it was the prior existence of the establishment that facilitated the exports. In the UAE, advisors at the embassy hinted that any cancellation of the *Rafale* contract, which required thirteen years of negotiations,¹⁴⁸ would have major diplomatic consequences for the UAE-France relationship.¹⁴⁹ Likewise, the establishment of the Abu Dhabi base was made possible by the renewal of defense agreements providing for the supply of equipment and by the creation of oil concessions for TotalEnergies. On the legal side, if the Commission interministérielle pour l'étude des exportations de matériels de guerre (CIEEMG) (Interministerial Commission for the Study of Exports of War Material) is planning to refuse to grant an export license, the Commission may inform the manufacturer, which in turn may withdraw the license from consideration so as to avoid harming relations with the recipient country.¹⁵⁰

The centrality of exports to French foreign policy in the Middle East is not new, and neither are the debates it provokes. France's dependence on arms exports was first identified in the 1970s and 1980s, and it continues to this day, a situation that is potentially problematic given that some of these exports go to countries at war in the Middle East (the UAE and Saudi Arabia are involved in Yemen). Every year, between 20 and 30% of France's total production of military equipment is destined for export, placing France in the "upper bracket" of European nations¹⁵¹ and potentially pushing manufacturers to "export at all costs". The minister of the armed forces pointed out in her hearing in 2019 that, faced with insufficient public procurement to support the defense industry, "we have no choice: we must export".¹⁵²

These exports also raise the question of technological sovereignty: client nations are increasingly demanding technology transfers via joint ventures and offsets, which allow the recipient country to develop its own industrial base in exchange for the signed contract.¹⁵³ The UAE is particularly keen—and more effective than its neighbors—to develop its own defense industrial base (DIB) in order to be less dependent on imports or even eventually to become an exporter itself, particularly to less-developed countries that are not markets of interest to the West. The UAE differs from the other Gulf states in its insistence on including various

148. D. Gallois, P. Ricard, and E. Vincent, "Rafale aux Émirats : treize ans de négociations pour un contrat record", *Le Monde*, December 3, 2021, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

149. Interview with a French diplomat, Abu Dhabi, May 12, 2022.

150. E. Soubrier, "Vendre des armes, et après ?", *Le Collimateur* podcast, IRSEM, May 24, 2022.

151. J. Droff and J. Malizard, "En graphiques : les exportations d'armes françaises", *op. cit.*

152. M. Cabirol, "Exportation d'armes vers l'Arabie Saoudite : Florence Parly s'explique", *La Tribune*, May 15, 2019, available at: www.latribune.fr.

153. L. Béraud-Sudreau, "La politique française de soutien aux exportations d'armement : raisons et limites d'un succès", *op. cit.*

technology transfer clauses in arms contracts.¹⁵⁴ The aim is also to train a local workforce so as to be able to subcontract from the big multinational arms manufacturers (Lockheed Martin, Thales...), for example using locally incorporated subsidiaries.

Upon its foundation in 2014, the Emirates Defence Industries Company (EDIC), a holding company for Emirati public companies, was run by a Frenchman, Luc Vigneron, the former CEO of Thales. EDIC facilitated technology transfer deals until its absorption in 2019 by the EDGE Group conglomerate, headed by an Emirati. Comprising twenty-five Emirati companies, in 2020 EDGE was the world's 23rd-largest armaments group, with 4.7 billion dollars of sales,¹⁵⁵ mostly to the local market, the result of the UAE's efforts to "Emiratize" the arms industry since the early 2000s. In 2020, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the UAE exported 191 million dollars' worth of arms, a figure that has steadily increased over the last ten years and a current record for the Gulf.

This process is less advanced in the other Gulf states, which nevertheless are slowly becoming more conscious of the dangers of dependence on imports and are keen to develop their own DIB. In 2021, Saudi Arabia announced it would invest 20 billion dollars in its own defense industry over the next ten years, a process that would be supervised by the General Authority for Military Industries (GAMI). Half of that sum would be earmarked for military research and development, which currently represents only 0.2% of Saudi military spending. The GAMI also encourages the Saudi armed forces to prioritize local development when signing contracts, a suggestion that does not currently seem to be being followed because of a lack of qualified personnel and a long habit of relying on foreign companies.¹⁵⁶ Qatar, meanwhile, is struggling to develop a local defense industry despite the creation in 2018 of Barzan Holdings, which was tasked with developing a Qatari industry with Western support but has encountered numerous setbacks.¹⁵⁷

The risk of technology theft and the marginalization of Western industries does not, therefore, seem to be an immediate threat in the Gulf states, other than the UAE. Another well-known risk associated with foreign arms sales, however, is the public perception of such sales, particularly when exports go to countries at war that do not always respect human rights. The sale of arms to Saudi Arabia during the war in Yemen provides

154. V. Gervais, "Du pétrole à l'armée : les stratégies de construction de l'État aux Émirats arabes unis", *Études de l'IRSEM*, no. 8, 2011.

155. Source: SIPRI Arms Industry Database, 2020.

156. U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, "Saudi Arabia Military Industry", May 25, 2021, available at: www.trade.gov.

157. "Barzan Holdings, colosse aux pieds de sable des ambitions militaro-industrielles qataries", *Intelligence Online*, October 25, 2021, available at: www.intelligenceonline.fr.

the clearest example of this criticism and the damage it can cause to French foreign policy in the region. Although France's arms exports to Riyadh were lower than those of the United Kingdom or the United States,¹⁵⁸ the risk that the weapons could be used against the Yemeni people led to criticism in French civil society, with the publication of numerous opinion pieces and questions to the government demanding more transparency on the issue. The response of the Ministry of the Armed Forces, which claimed that the bombs delivered by France and dropped on Yemen by Saudi Arabia were "not supposed to be used", or that the CAESAR howitzers were "strictly for defensive use", has not made this aspect of French strategy any clearer.¹⁵⁹

It is, therefore, important to note the difficulty of reconciling France's policy of "transparent and strict" control of arms exports with the practical feasibility of monitoring client use once the weapons are in their arsenals, although French obligations in this area tend to concern the establishment of a risk matrix rather than post-sale monitoring. As shown by press revelations of clashes over munitions exports to Saudi Arabia between the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, the CIEEMG, and the Ministry of the Armed Forces, different French actors may disagree regarding the line to take and the role these exports play.¹⁶⁰

A Post-Oil Future

The Gulf states thus appear to be ideal partners for France in the region due to their stable regimes and flourishing economies. Nevertheless, recent developments and difficulties are calling this assumption into question, making caution advisable in the long term. The oil-producing countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, where over 40% of gross domestic product (GDP) depends on oil—allowing it to maintain a quasi-rentier economy while generously subsidizing its population's needs—had to deal with falling oil prices during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the first quarter of 2020, the Saudi company Aramco reported a 25% drop in its net income,¹⁶¹ although oil prices returned to a very high level in 2021 and 2022 due to the war in Ukraine and a reduction in Russian oil exports.

While the changes in fiscal policy subsequently adopted (corporate tax in the UAE,¹⁶² a possible personal income tax on Omanis¹⁶³) are enabling a

158. According to SIPRI, 82% of arms exported to Saudi Arabia between 2017 and 2021 came from the United States. France and the United Kingdom were equal at 5% each, a sharp reduction for London compared to the 2012–2016 period, when it supplied 27% of the military equipment imported by Riyadh.

159. E. Soubrier, "Vendre des armes, et après ?", *op. cit.*, 22.

160. "Révélations sur des ventes d'armes illicites à l'Arabie Saoudite", *Disclose*, December 3, 2021, available at: <https://disclose.ngo>.

161. B. Winder, "Challenges and Opportunities for the Saudi Economy", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 18, 2020, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

162. N. Turak, "The UAE Introduces Its First-Ever Corporate Taxes, Set to Start in 2023", *CNBC*, January 31, 2022, available at: www.cnbc.com.

gradual move away from a rentier economy, they may lead to public discontent in the long term, although the situation varies greatly from country to country.¹⁶⁴ These rich countries must also find ways to meet the needs of a young, educated population: although the UAE or Qatar are still managing to provide jobs in the public sector for almost all their citizens, this administrative manna is likely to run dry at some point, as has already happened in Bahrain or Oman.¹⁶⁵ Finally, increasing access to social media could lead to citizens questioning the authoritarian regimes they live under.

By contrast, the transition to a post-oil future and the forced diversification of the Gulf economies, which are opening up to foreign markets, the financial sector, large ten-year projects like Vision 2030,¹⁶⁶ and “green energies”, represent a real opportunity for French companies, which are currently struggling to penetrate local markets outside the arms industry. Between 2017 and 2021, arms made up more than 24% of French exports in all the Gulf states except Oman and Bahrain, reaching as high as 53% in the UAE.¹⁶⁷

Although these figures are, of course, skewed by the very high cost of arms compared to common consumer goods, they nevertheless reflect an economic reality: France’s market share in the UAE is gradually eroding, from 7% in 2000 to 2.2% in 2019.¹⁶⁸ Likewise, France was not among the top ten countries in which the UAE planned to invest in coming years,¹⁶⁹ unlike the United Kingdom (which signed a commercial agreement worth 12 billion euros in September 2021) or Israel (creation of a sovereign fund of 10 billion euros), raising questions about France’s economic future in the region.

Moreover, many of the monarchies, emirates, and sultanates of the Gulf are facing succession crises: although the succession in Oman following the death of Sultan Qaboos went smoothly, as did the succession in the UAE after the death of Khalifa bin Zayed, the transition is likely to be more complicated in Saudi Arabia, where the designation of Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) as crown prince in 2017 was met with displeasure by part of the royal family. The internal repression of rivals (including royals), Riyadh’s involvement in the Lebanese political process, the assassination of

163. S. Castelier, “Oman on Cusp of Introducing Personal Income Tax”, *Al-Monitor*, April 22, 2022, available at: www.al-monitor.com.

164. Bahrain and Oman, which have a lower GDP than their Emirati and Qatari neighbors, are already experiencing protests.

165. A. Benbernou and D. Schmid, “Moyen-Orient : l’économie dans la course à la puissance”, *Études de l’Ifri*, Ifri, March 2020, 41.

166. A. Arefi, “Le monde en 2030 – L’Arabie Saoudite peut-elle se réformer?”, *Le Point*, January 17, 2020, available at : www.lepoint.fr.

167. Reports on French arms exports presented to the French Parliament from 2018 to 2022.

168. C. Chesnot and G. Malbrunot, *Le Déclassement français*, Paris: Michel Lafon, 2022, 257.

169. *Ibid.*

Jamal Khashoggi,¹⁷⁰ and the war in Yemen all risk jeopardizing MbS's political future. While France's relations with its Gulf partners depend essentially on personal friendships, it is crucial to consider the dangers of this dependence.

Jordan and Egypt, Partners that Are Less Stable than They Appear

Egypt and Jordan, the first Middle Eastern countries to recognize the state of Israel, in 1979 and 1994 respectively, are portrayed by France as “stable countries on which France can and should rely”¹⁷¹ and, as such, as partners for in-depth cooperation. Their positions align with those of France on numerous regional issues: Iraqi sovereignty (France supports the trilateral conferences between Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt), resolution of the Syrian conflict (Amman and Cairo are members of the Small Group, an initiative supporting the political process in Syria), or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an issue in which Egypt and Jordan have traditionally played a mediating role. The signing of the Abraham Accords thus caused “concern”¹⁷² among the Jordanian authorities regarding the long-term viability of this role, given Israel's increasing integration into the Arab world as the Palestinian cause becomes less prominent among the region's concerns.¹⁷³

Long-Standing Cooperation

Jordan, described in a 2019 French Senate report as the “cornerstone of stability for a Middle East in crisis”,¹⁷⁴ is home to a considerable French military presence, primarily at the Prince Hassan Air Base, the site of the BAP H5 base (see above). This base, where the French Army operates alongside the Jordanian air force, offers an important logistical advantage for air operations against Daesh thanks to its proximity to the Iraqi-Syrian theater, despite the sharp reduction in the number of strikes. In the context of a shift away from counterterrorism and toward strategic competition, the base also serves to maintain France's positive political and strategic relationship with Jordan.

Paris signs a bilateral cooperation plan with Amman every year, focused primarily on training for the Jordanian special forces, air operations, mountain combat, and intelligence.¹⁷⁵ This partnership

170. R. Backmann, “L'assassinat de Khashoggi : une bombe à retardement sous le trône de ‘MBS’”, *Mediapart*, December 3, 2018, available at: www.mediapart.fr.

171. Meyer and Rouillard, *Rapport d'information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient*, 39.

172. Meyer and Rouillard, *Rapport d'information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient*, 45.

173. Ghaith al-Omari, “Making the Most of Jordan's Peace Diplomacy”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 29, 2022, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org.

174. Cigolotti and Roger, *Rapport d'information sur la Jordanie*.

175. C. Goasguen, *Rapport sur le projet de loi adopté par le Sénat, autorisant l'approbation de l'accord entre le Gouvernement de la République française et le Gouvernement du Royaume*

strengthens the Jordanian forces, which are geographically exposed to any overspill of the conflict in Syria and Iraq, while also providing France with an independent situation assessment thanks to intelligence sensors deployed on-site and good relations with the Jordanian intelligence service. Finally, France is a core member of Operation Gallant Phoenix, based in Jordan, which harnesses and analyzes massive amounts of data recovered by the Coalition against Daesh for use in legal proceedings in terrorism cases.¹⁷⁶

In terms of exports, Jordan's low defense budget (1.7 billion dollars in 2021) means it is not one of France's preferred outlets. There is, however, some French equipment in the Jordanian army's highly diverse arsenal: 80 Leclerc tanks (initially sold to the UAE but given for free by Abu Dhabi to Amman) and 10 Super Puma helicopters.¹⁷⁷ The volume of sales is low, fluctuating between 500,000 and 2.5 million euros over the last ten years.¹⁷⁸

By contrast, Egypt was France's second-biggest client in the Middle East between 2012 and 2021,¹⁷⁹ with 12.28 billion euros' worth of arms orders in this ten-year period. This allowed France to maintain its position as Cairo's second-biggest arms supplier, behind the United States (from 2012 to 2016) and then Russia (from 2017 to 2021), at a time when Egypt was boosting its military procurement (from 11th to 3rd place on the list of the world's largest arms importers).¹⁸⁰

The arms contracts signed in 2014 and 2015 for the delivery of 24 *Rafales*, four *Gowind* corvettes (including a transfer of technology to Egypt), two *Mistral*-class amphibious assault ships,¹⁸¹ one FREMM, and missiles thus symbolize the renewal of the relationship between Cairo and Paris, which had faltered during President Morsi's short term. The rise to power of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and the deteriorating security situation in the region following the emergence of Daesh around the same time motivated this rapprochement, focused on "common interests" including security, the fight against terrorism, and in particular a shared position on Libya and the

hachémite de Jordanie relatif au statut de leurs forces, Report no. 239, Paris, Foreign Affairs Committee, National Assembly, September 27, 2017.

176. E. Vincent and C. Ayad, "Opération Gallant Phoenix', la guerre secrète des données contre les djihadistes", *Le Monde*, March 25, 2021, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

177. *The Military Balance 2022*.

178. Report on exports presented to the French Parliament.

179. France's biggest client is the UAE, which spent more than 21 billion euros over that period, although that figure is inflated by the *Rafale* contract of December 2021. See: Report on exports presented to the French Parliament.

180. See: SIPRI. Russia's rise is due particularly to the cooling of relations between Egypt and the United States following the violent repression of protests in Egypt in 2013. Relations did improve, however, under the Trump presidency.

181. The two ships were initially destined for Russia, but France canceled the sale in the wake of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014. Saudi Arabia then financed their purchase for Egypt.

prevention of Turkish expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁸² This also led to the creation in 2017 of a high military committee (HMC) headed by both countries' chiefs of defense staff. Finally, the signing of a new contract in 2021 for the delivery of 30 *Rafales*, including pilot training, suggests this Franco-Egyptian relationship is set to continue.

Nevertheless, this close relationship is not without political risks, as shown by Egypt's misuse of French technological resources to spy on civilians.¹⁸³ Moreover, the growing relationship between Egypt and Russia, with the delivery of significant quantities of arms from Moscow to Cairo as well as joint Egyptian and Russian exercises held in the Black Sea at the end of 2020, raises questions about Cairo's place within a Westernized axis in the Middle East supported by France.¹⁸⁴ Finally, Egypt, and to a lesser extent Jordan, has its own structural weaknesses that could worsen in the coming years, undermining the stability of France's partnerships.

The Illusion of Stability

Between the coup d'état in 2013, when Field Marshal al-Sisi took power, and 2021, the Egyptian population grew from 90 to 100 million people. This demographic growth is now seen by Egypt's leaders as a threat to the stability of the country on a par with terrorism.¹⁸⁵ Egypt is facing growing social demands from the 800,000 young people each year who join a labor market that is still dominated by the informal sector (up to 50% of jobs) and the public sector (31% of GDP) and cannot easily absorb a generation of young workers who are often overeducated for the positions available.¹⁸⁶ This uncontrolled growth is accompanied by increasing poverty, which the government is struggling to curb because of the fall in the price of hydrocarbons and the decrease in tourism during the Covid-19 crisis. The army's predation in numerous economic areas, particularly construction, undermines previous structural reforms that had begun to clean up and diversify the economy.

France also sees Jordan as a country "whose stability is real but remains fragile",¹⁸⁷ with substantial economic difficulties. Its public debt remains worryingly high (91% of GDP in 2021), while the suspension of tourism during the pandemic was a heavy blow for an economy that

182. H. Mourad, "France-Égypte : les raisons d'un réchauffement", *Confluences Méditerranée* 96, no. 1, 2016: 85–93.

183. C. Romanos, "France- Égypte : les relations dangereuses", *France Culture*, November 22, 2021, available at: www.radiofrance.fr.

184. N. Hedjazi, "La relation russo-égyptienne ou la nécessité d'une alliance", *Diplomatie*, no. 108, March–April 2021.

185. J.-P. Filiu, "La bombe à retardement de la population égyptienne", *Le Monde*, March 1, 2020, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

186. "Égypte – Indicateurs et conjoncture", Directorate General of the Treasury, French Ministry of the Economy, July 19, 2022, available at: www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr.

187. Meyer and Rouillard, *Rapport d'information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient*, 43.

remains relatively undiversified.¹⁸⁸ Although the Arab Spring of 2011 did not have the same effect in Jordan as it did in neighboring countries, mostly because of its relatively robust monarchy (which nonetheless showed signs of fragility in 2021 during the crisis involving Prince Hamzah¹⁸⁹), public protests are not uncommon, as shown by the extraordinary teachers' strike in 2019. The issue of Syrian refugees, whose integration into Jordanian society is complicated, exacerbates the country's economic difficulties and will threaten its stability in the medium term if the civil war in Syria does not come to an end.

A Necessary Revolution of Franco-Israeli Relations

Formerly a pariah in the Middle East, supported solely by the United States, Israel now seems to be the country everyone wants to win over in the region. But relations between Paris and Tel Aviv are still impaired by decades of France's "Arab policy" in the second half of the twentieth century, perceived in Israel as favoritism toward the Arab nations at the expense of the Jewish state.¹⁹⁰ Although a certain rapprochement took place during Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency (see above), it has not had much practical effect to date. France does not have the same levers in Israel as it does in the Arab countries in the region: anxious not to incur the wrath of its usual Arab clients, Paris only sells very limited quantities of military equipment to Tel Aviv (208 million euros' worth of arms ordered between 2012 and 2021), which is rather an exporter and a competitor in the regional and global military sector, particularly for cutting-edge technologies.

Military cooperation between the two countries, therefore, is essentially restricted to exchanges of intelligence in multiple domains (counterterrorism, the regional situation, nuclear proliferation¹⁹¹), although the information provided is generally skewed by strong political undertones, especially concerning Iran.¹⁹² France and Israel also carry out joint military training exercises, bilateral or multilateral,

188. "Jordan" country file, *Coface*, February 2022, available at: www.coface.com.

189. A crisis that is still ongoing: in May 2022, a year after the accusations of inciting a coup that led to the arrest of Prince Hamzah, the King of Jordan announced that his half-brother would remain under house arrest because of his "erratic" behavior. See "Dynastie. En Jordanie, le prince Hamzah de nouveau assigné à résidence par le roi", *Courrier international*, May 20, 2022, available at: www.courrierinternational.com.

190. A.-B. Hoffner, "France et Israël : 'les relations se fondent sur des malentendus'", *La Croix*, January 23, 2020, available at: www.la-croix.com.

191. The French financial intelligence service (TRACFIN) and the Israeli Money Laundering and Terror Financing Prohibition Authority (IMPA) announced the signing of a cooperation agreement on October 24. See: <https://il.ambafrance.org>.

192. Interview at the Ministry of the Armed Forces, June 2022.

particularly in the Mediterranean Sea, a situation that the French general staffs seem to want to encourage.¹⁹³

Although this desire for cooperation is real at the military level, motivated by common security interests (fight against terrorism and Iranian influence, securing the Eastern Mediterranean against Turkey...), its manifestation at the political level seems more delicate. The non-resolution of the Palestinian question remains a sticking point in Franco-Israeli relations: Paris “has always pushed for the two-state solution”¹⁹⁴ and treats it as the sine qua non of regional stability, despite the failure of the “Paris Conference for Peace in the Middle East” launched by Jean-Marc Ayrault in 2017. The two-state solution is becoming less and less likely as Israel continues to colonize the West Bank, as tensions grow between Hamas and Fatah within the Palestinian movement,¹⁹⁵ and as the importance of the Palestinian cause diminishes in the Arab world, as illustrated by the Abraham Accords.

These accords, and more broadly the rapprochement encouraged by the United States between Israel and some of the Gulf states, and even with its historical enemies like Lebanon,¹⁹⁶ are part of a broader trend of decreasing Western leadership in the Middle East and the rise in power of regional actors. Although France’s interests in combating Islamist terrorism and limiting Iranian influence in the Middle East converge with those of the countries in this new alliance, the structural weaknesses of this alliance, which represents the sidelining of Western powers in favor of less demanding regional partners, mean France must choose its position with caution. Moreover, relations between Paris and the members of this axis depend on numerous economic factors whose fragility was highlighted by the Covid-19 crisis, while France’s traditional partners are gradually being excluded from the alliance. Finally, the relationships between the countries of the “axis of Abraham” and France’s competitors in the Middle East, particularly China, Russia, and Turkey, also raise questions about France’s positioning.

193. “Défense : la France et Israël envisagent une ‘coopération et des échanges d’expertise’”, *i24 News*, November 5, 2020, available at: www.i24news.tv.

194. Meyer and Rouillard, *Rapport d’information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient*, 30.

195. Iran’s support for Hamas is important here. It has increased in response to improved relations between Israel, Egypt, and Sudan, the latter two having previously been less willing to enforce the blockade on Gaza. See A. Ajoury, “L’ombre de l’Iran plane sur le conflit entre le Hamas et Israël”, *L’Orient-Le Jour*, May 24, 2021, available at: www.lorientlejour.com.

196. For example, the agreement between Israel and Lebanon regarding their maritime border signed on October 11, 2022, with the United States as an observer. This delimitation agreement, which was welcomed by France, is supposed to resolve a long-standing dispute that has been fueled by the rich gas resources of the Eastern Mediterranean. Nevertheless, there are still numerous obstacles to its implementation. See N. Rougier, “Entre Israël et le Liban, un accord ‘historique’ sur la frontière maritime”, *La Croix*, October 11, 2022, available at: www.la-croix.com.

The Challenge of Extra-Regional Powers

As well as the “axis of resistance” and the “axis of Abraham”, France must also deal with the actions of certain extra-regional powers, foremost among them Russia. Between its active support for the Syrian regime, its quest for supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean, and its growing ties with Iran, Russia’s actions in the region undoubtedly impact French interests. In economic terms, China is increasingly making its presence felt as a competitor in the Middle East, where it is also seeking to develop its military strength, while India is using its apparent neutrality to develop ties across the region. Finally, Turkey’s role is problematic: although Ankara is one of France’s partners in the fight against Daesh, its support for certain terrorist groups, its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, and its military operations against France’s partners in Iraq and Syria all damage the equilibrium that France wants to encourage in the region.

The Destabilizing Return of Russia in the Middle East

Russia has long-standing ties with the Middle East, which were reflected during the Cold War in its support for certain socialist regimes and considerable arms sales to all the countries in the region.¹⁹⁷ Although this influence waned following the fall of the Soviet Union, there has been a clear shift since 2015, when Russia intervened in Syria to support Assad’s regime against all “armed opponents”, in other words, Daesh but also any opposition to the regime, Islamist or not.¹⁹⁸ Russia provided the Syrian regime with decisive military support, enabling it to regain control of the “useful” land around Damascus, Homs, and above all Aleppo. This support was detrimental to the rebellion, but also to French policy in Syria, which saw Assad’s departure as the prerequisite for any transition.

Russia has also consolidated its access to the Mediterranean via the Tartus naval base, which it has used since 1971 and for which it renewed the lease for 49 years in 2017, allowing it to maintain a real presence in the Eastern Mediterranean in order to challenge the Western powers, including France. It has significantly reinforced its presence since the beginning of the war in Ukraine so as to ensure the projection of Russian power in the area.¹⁹⁹ Likewise, the Khmeimim Air Base appears to be a laboratory for Russian A2/AD capacities. It is defended by an air defense system focused

197. E. Rumer and A. S. Weiss, “A Brief Guide to Russia’s Return to the Middle East”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 24, 2019.

198. On Russia’s intervention in Syria, see R. E. Hamilton, C. Miller, and A. Stein (eds.), *Russia’s War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*, Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020.

199. M. Pinel, “Conséquences de l’invasion en Ukraine sur l’industrie d’armement et le déploiement russe en Syrie (T 1427)”, *Revue Défense Nationale*, September 28, 2022.

on long-range (S-300 and S-400) and medium-range (*Buk M2*) surface-to-air missiles.²⁰⁰ Various operations have also enabled Russian troops to train in a more logistically complex terrain than previous Russian deployments in the Caucasus. Nevertheless, there are questions regarding the sustainability of Russia's military activity in Syria in light of Ukrainian advances and the depletion of Russian stocks, which will in time become incapable of supplying external areas.

Moscow has also established itself as an indispensable diplomatic actor in the attempt to resolve the Syrian civil war via the Astana process,²⁰¹ a rival to the European process, and is seeking to present itself as a leader in non-Western counterterrorism in the region, for example by sharing intelligence with Iran, Syria, and Iraq.²⁰² This priority placed on the fight against terror allows it to maintain ties with Israel in order to deconflict Israeli strikes on Iranian positions in Syria, despite Iran being one of Russia's partners of convenience in the Middle East, with the ties between them boosted by the war in Ukraine. Tehran has supplied Russia with ballistic missiles and drones, which it has used on the ground since mid-October.²⁰³ A strategic partnership agreement between Iran and Russia is expected to be signed before March 2023.²⁰⁴

This war has also confirmed the opportunism of regional actors regarding their relations with Moscow. Anxious not to offend Russia or to become embroiled in a Ukrainian conflict seen as remote, the UAE and Saudi Arabia abstained from voting on the UN sanctions against Russia on February 25, 2022,²⁰⁵ while Syria voted against them. The position of the Gulf states in international bodies has since grown closer to that of the West (on October 11, all the countries in the region, except Syria and Iran, voted to condemn Russia's annexation of four Ukrainian regions). Nevertheless, bilateral relations with Russia remain strong: the president of the UAE visited Moscow on the same day, primarily to discuss a united action by the OPEC nations to reduce production in order to stabilize prices.²⁰⁶

200. P. Grasser, "Déni d'accès en Méditerranée orientale : l'un des thermomètres des relations OTAN/Russie", *DSI*, no. 160, July–August 2022.

201. S. Abboud, "Making Peace to Sustain War: The Astana Process and Syria's Illiberal Peace", *Peacebuilding* 9, no. 3, 2021: 326–43.

202. "Baghdad's Quadripartite Information Center Discusses Security Issues", *SANA*, June 8, 2018, available at: www.sana.sy. The center is run by the Military Intelligence Directorate, the Ministry of Defense's military intelligence service.

203. "Iran Agrees to Ship Missiles, More Drones to Russia", *Reuters*, October 18, 2022, available at: www.reuters.com.

204. "FM: Comprehensive Iran-Russia Agreement to Be Signed by Late March", *IRNA News*, October 19, 2022, available at: en.irna.ir.

205. F. Dazi-Héni, "Comment interpréter le refus émirati et saoudien de se ranger dans le 'camp de l'Occident' sur la guerre en Ukraine ?", *Brève stratégique*, no. 36, IRSEM, March 29, 2022.

206. L.-M. Gaveriaux, "Les Émirats soignent leur relation privilégiée avec la Russie", *Les Échos*, October 13, 2022, available at: www.lesechos.fr.

The Asian Powers: Economic Competitors with Little Investment in Defense

China's economic relations with the Middle Eastern countries go back to 2001, when the Communist Party adopted a more active diplomatic stance. They were formalized and strengthened by the Belt and Road Initiative, which was launched in 2013²⁰⁷ and now includes 21 Arab countries in North Africa and the Middle East, with comprehensive strategic partnerships signed especially with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, the three principal recipients of Chinese investment in the Middle East. China's interest is primarily to secure oil supplies in exchange for Chinese investment: in 2021, Iraq was the third-largest supplier of oil to China, behind Saudi Arabia and Russia. In return, Beijing invested over 10 billion dollars in Iraq that same year, mostly in the construction of road, air, and oil infrastructure.²⁰⁸

Outside the energy sector and the construction and public works industry, these investments are concentrated in critical infrastructure, particularly ports: in 2018, the China Ocean Shipping Company won a 35-year concession to operate a new terminal in a port in Abu Dhabi, while in 2021, Saudi Arabia signed a contract with China allowing it to operate the Red Sea port of Jazan. Several arms contracts have also been signed: drones and trainer aircraft for the UAE, ballistic missiles for Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The UAE's use of Huawei technologies and the Chinese concession in the port in Abu Dhabi have led to strained relations between Washington and Abu Dhabi, culminating in the cancellation of the UAE's planned contract to purchase *F-35s* from the US²⁰⁹ (and ultimately facilitating the purchase of French *Rafales*).

The US's Gulf partners have been irritated by Washington's demands and its criticism of their ties with China, a situation that Beijing has exploited to boost China's presence in the Middle East. Like Russia, relations between China and the region seem to be eased by the fact that Chinese deals are not subject to political conditions. In 2021, China and Iran concluded a 25-year cooperation agreement covering economic, military and security aspects. Beijing continues to buy Iranian oil despite American sanctions,²¹⁰ and it admitted Iran as a permanent member of the

207. N. M. Shahwan, "Where Is China's Role in the Middle East Heading?", *Daily Sabah*, March 15, 2022, available at: www.dailysabah.com.

208. E. White and A. England, "China Pours Money into Iraq as US Retreats from Middle East", *Financial Times*, February 2, 2022, available at: www.ft.com.

209. G. Rumley, "China's Security Presence in the Middle East: Redlines and Guidelines for the United States", *Policy Notes* 123, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 18, 2022, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org.

210. M. Motamedi, "Iran Says 25-Year China Agreement Enters Implementation Stage", *Al Jazeera*, January 15, 2022, available at: www.aljazeera.com.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in September 2022. China also signed a memorandum of understanding with Syria in 2022 to enable Damascus to join the Belt and Road Initiative, a step that was presented in the official Chinese press as a “victory” for China, which “wins more trust from Mideast due to equal, sincere strategy”, in other words by treating all countries the same, unlike the United States, which is quicker to impose sanctions and hand out “good marks.”²¹¹

India, a less controversial partner than China, is the second-biggest Asian power in terms of its presence in the Middle East, where it also assumes a primarily economic role. There are strong reciprocal dependencies between India and the region’s countries, especially the Gulf states: more than 60% of the oil imported by India comes from the GCC nations, while there are 8 to 9 million Indians living in the area, performing essential functions in the private sector (doctors, engineers, service personnel, etc.) and sending back over 41 billion dollars to their families in India.²¹² Like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is becoming less of an obstacle to the Gulf states in their relations with Israel, the Islamophobic statements of India’s BJP leaders (Bharatiya Janata Party, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s right-wing, Hindu nationalist party) may provoke strong reactions among the populations of the Middle East, but less so among its leaders.²¹³ Military developments are slowly taking shape, particularly in the form of joint air or naval exercises.²¹⁴

Finally, India has excellent economic, diplomatic, and military relations with Israel, which have been strengthened since Modi came to power in 2014. Tel Aviv and New Delhi greeted the thirtieth anniversary of their bilateral relationship, centered around common concerns like the fight against terrorism, with much fanfare in 2022.²¹⁵ The Indian government is also thought to have purchased the Pegasus spyware from the Israeli company NSO in 2017, while India is the Israeli arms industry’s biggest export client.²¹⁶

211. R. Yellinek, “The Strengthening Ties Between China and the Middle East”, Middle East Institute, January 26, 2022, available at: www.mei.edu.

212. E. Roche, “Will Prophet Remarks Controversy Shake India-Middle East Trade?”, *Al Jazeera*, June 16, 2022, available at: www.aljazeera.com.

213. K. Taneja, “An Avoidable Fracas Between India and the Gulf”, Observer Research Foundation, June 10, 2022, available at: www.orfonline.org.

214. The UAE participated as an observer at the Varuna 21 annual exercise conducted by the French and Indian navies, and India was involved in the Desert Flag air exercise in March 2021. See B. Guillou, “Varuna : la France au côté de l’Inde et des EAU”, *Air & Cosmos*, April 20, 2021, available at: <https://air-cosmos.com>; L. Lagneau, “L’Inde et l’Arabie Saoudite organisent leur premier exercice naval conjoint dans le golfe Persique”, *Zone militaire*, August 10, 2021, available at: www.opex360.com.

215. N. Subramanian, “Explained: The India-Israel Relationship”, *Indian Express*, February 3, 2022, available at: <https://indianexpress.com>.

216. A. Essa, “India and Israel: The Arms Trade in Charts and Numbers”, *Middle East Eye*, May 31, 2022, available at: www.middleeasteye.net.

Again, joint military exercises seem to be the first step in the construction of the bilateral relationship.²¹⁷

Turkey's Ambitions to Become a "Coopetitor"

Another non-Arab regional power with an important role in the Middle East is Turkey, which has been particularly interventionist in recent years, renouncing the “zero problems with neighbors” foreign policy it advocated in the 2000s. The Arab Spring and its aftermath, particularly the overthrow of President Morsi in Egypt by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, revealed the fragility of the governments and the Muslim Brotherhood movement that Ankara so fervently supports. In line with his dream of “neo-Ottomanism”,²¹⁸ President Erdoğan has adopted a policy of foreign military intervention, supported by a very active defense industry.²¹⁹ Some of these military operations conflict directly with France’s partnership policy in the region, complicating relations between Paris and Ankara, which are already marred by the personal animosity between Macron and Erdoğan.²²⁰

In Iraq, the targeting of members of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) creates tension between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), traditionally close to Ankara and opposed to the PKK, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which takes the opposite position. Yet, a good relationship between the two Kurdish forces, which each have their own Peshmerga militia, is essential for effective counterterrorism in Kurdistan. The “Peshmerga of the future” project, which aims to unite—or at least improve coordination between—these two forces, is largely supported by France but jeopardized by Turkish operations. More broadly, regular Turkish strikes on PKK positions,²²¹ sometimes outside the Kurdistan Region and causing major collateral damage,²²² undermine Iraq’s sovereignty and hamper Paris’s project for Baghdad. And although the targeting of France’s SDF partners in Syria is difficult for Paris to accept, Turkey is still considered a necessary partner in the fight against terrorism, particularly for dealing with French jihadists arrested in Syria. Coupled with the anxiety caused by the specter of illegal immigration currently being held back by Turkey, this represents an important source of leverage for

217. India participated twice (in 2017 and 2021) in the Blue Flag air exercise in Israel. See R. Pandit, “India to Take Part in Multi-Nation Air Combat Exercise in Israel This Month”, *The Times of India*, October 7, 2021, available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>.

218. D. Schmid, “Turquie : du kéralisme au néo-ottomanisme”, in special report “Populismes et nationalismes dans le monde”, *Questions internationales*, no. 83, January–February 2017.

219. É. Bouvier, “Turquie. L’industrie de l’armement à marche forcée vers l’autonomie”, *Orient XXI*, October 28, 2021, available at: <https://orientxxi.info>.

220. Meyer and Rouillard, *Rapport d’information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient*, 111.

221. S. Çevik, “Turkey’s Military Operations in Syria and Iraq”, *SWP*, May 30, 2022, available at: www.swp-berlin.org.

222. “Iraqi PM Slams Turkey after Kurdistan Strike Kills 9 Civilians”, *France 24*, July 20, 2022, available at: www.france24.com.

Ankara.²²³ Finally, Turkish support for HTS in northeastern Syria further entrenches the situation in the country and makes the resolution of the political crisis more complicated.

Besides Iraq and Syria, Turkey also has a presence in Qatar: the Qatar-Turkey Combined Joint Force Command has been in operation since 2015 at a joint military base near Doha, which currently has 3,000 military personnel. Major works have been carried out at the base since 2019 to add naval and aerial infrastructure so that it will eventually be able to house 5,000 personnel.²²⁴ This presence has been described as destabilizing by the UAE,²²⁵ which sees it as reinforcing the polarization between the United States' allies in the Gulf on the one hand, and a "radical axis" consisting of Qatar, Turkey, and Iran on the other. Ankara was indeed very active during the blockade of Doha by its Gulf neighbors, not hesitating to deploy its soldiers on the border between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In Libya, another theater where Turkish forces have been deployed in recent years, Doha and Ankara both support the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity against the Egyptian, Emirati, and French forces defending Field Marshal Haftar. Finally, this stance of determined opposition to the "axis of Abraham" can also be seen in the Eastern Mediterranean, where Turkey has adopted an aggressive policy that sometimes risks direct confrontation with France.²²⁶

At the same time, Turkey seems anxious to preserve its capital as a mediating power between the West and Russia, which has increased markedly since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.²²⁷ Together with a difficult economic situation, these political interests are forcing Ankara to come out of its isolation and start a rapprochement with the other countries in the region. President Erdoğan traveled to the UAE in February 2022 to confirm the (supposed) end of rivalries within the GCC,²²⁸ welcomed Israeli president Isaac Herzog in March, and put an end to his disagreement with Saudi Arabia over the murder of Jamal Khashoggi with a visit to Saudi Arabia in May.²²⁹ Although Turkey's rapprochement with Israel seems set to last, with Ankara having distanced itself from Hamas and an increase in

223. J. Barnes-Dacey and H. Lovatt, "Principled Pragmatism: Europe's Place in a Multipolar Middle East", European Council on Foreign Relations, April 28, 2022, 18.

224. M. Gurcan, "Turkey's Military Base in Qatar to Expand with Air, Naval Elements", *Al-Monitor*, August 20, 2019, available at: www.al-monitor.com.

225. "UAE Official Says Turkish Base in Qatar Destabilises Region", *Reuters*, October 10, 2020, available at: www.reuters.com.

226. J. Jabbour, "France vs. Turkey in the EastMed: A Geopolitical Rivalry Between a 'Keeper' of the Old Order and a Challenging Emergent Power", *Briefings de l'Ifri*, Ifri, May 6, 2021.

227. M. Jégo, "Guerre en Ukraine: le président turc Erdogan se pose en médiateur auprès de Vladimir Poutine", *Le Monde*, October 13, 2022, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

228. J. Jabbour, "After a Divorce, a Frosty Entente: Turkey's Rapprochement with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Strategic Necessity and Transactional Partnership in a Shifting World Order", *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, May 3, 2022.

229. D. Ottaway, "Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel: The Prospects for Détente in the Middle East", Wilson Center, May 3, 2022, available at: www.wilsoncenter.org.

military cooperation between the two countries (symbolized by the Israeli defense minister Benny Gantz's visit to Turkey in October 2022), its relations with the Gulf states are likely to remain tense.

To understand the Middle East and the threats currently facing France, existing interpretative frameworks must be adapted in light of the major geopolitical changes taking place in the region. The “axis of resistance” in its various forms seems to be one of these threats, although it also represents a double-edged sword. While the growing heterogeneity and radicalization of the Shiite militia movement could increase instability in Iraq, Lebanon, or Syria, they may also make this axis easier to manipulate by isolating factions that are less favorable to Iranian policy or dissatisfied with the status quo, ultimately reducing the danger posed by the axis to France.

By contrast, the friction already visible within the “axis of Abraham” should prompt France not to approach the alliance as a stable, permanent bloc, but rather as a group of countries with disparate interests, casting doubt on the close links that Paris has with some of its members. One risk that must be especially borne in mind is France's political and economic dependence on arms exports to countries that are less and less loyal to their Western clients and increasingly anxious to develop their own DIB. The evolution of Israel's place in the region also calls into question France's policy regarding the Jewish state, with which it has complicated relations and which appears to be a major competitor, now assuming its full strength and endowed with a range of military and political resources, giving it the potential to sideline Western countries and defend its own interests.

Finally, the opportunism displayed by the Gulf states, Egypt, Syria, and Israel regarding extra-regional strategic competitors such as Russia, China, India, and Turkey could cast doubt on the trust France places in its local partners, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine. Although these extra-regional powers cannot, in the short term, challenge the historical provider of security in the Middle East that is the United States, the Gulf states' attempts to play their supporters off against each other urges careful reflection on what sort of relations should be sought with them. All these factors make it advisable to carry out a comprehensive review of France's strategy in the Middle East and how it can be adapted.

Toward a Strategy Focused on Competition

The challenges facing France in the Middle East are multiple: its partners are losing interest in the fight against terrorism, which nevertheless remains the core of France's strategic posture; alliances are being redefined, making the situation harder to interpret; and extra-regional states are gaining strength in the region, challenging the West's presence—mostly American but also French. To overcome them, France has numerous assets: thanks to its long history in the region, its relations with most of the area's leaders are cordial, if not friendly. Its strategic posture is already well established around three poles (the UAE, Iraq, and Jordan), with a military presence comprising all three branches of the armed forces and serving as proof to its partners of the reliability of French support.

Nevertheless, this posture must evolve in light of new challenges. The reduced budget allocated to maintaining this posture calls for a redefinition and reprioritization of the interests France seeks to defend in the area. A shift from a presence focused on the fight against terrorism toward assertive positioning in the context of great power competition seems necessary if France wants to remain a “balancing power”.

Once its interests have been prioritized, France's posture can be redefined by means of partnerships. The French forces deployed in the area must be properly protected by agreements signed with local partners in order to forestall any challenge to their presence. A broader reflection on the choice of partners also seems necessary to avoid strategic surprises. Moreover, the French presence itself could be reviewed and clarified so as to allocate more resources to competition.

Finally, given the complexity of the situation, which requires more than a merely military response, all core state institutions, and indeed all French actors capable of exerting an influence in the region, must be put to use. Improved interministerial coordination would help to allocate missions more efficiently and adapt France's presence to meet the needs of each country. An openness to aligning its strategy more closely with its European partners would also allow France to benefit from each partner's expertise and influence developments in the Middle East more effectively, in the face of actors whose interests conflict with those of the EU.

A Strategy of Defending France's Interests

France has numerous strategic interests to defend in the Middle East: freedom of access and navigation, protection of French citizens, containing the terrorist threat, access to energy resources, and maintaining its long-standing influence in the region. To continue to defend them in a context of strategic competition and criticism of Western leadership, France must first identify and prioritize these interests, and then assess the threats facing its current strategy.

Multiple, Complementary Interests

Top of France's list of priorities in the Middle East are security interests, both because of the region's geographical proximity to Europe and the numerous crises and threats it is facing. France's security objectives are clearly stated in the *Strategic Update 2021*²³⁰:

“Wherever possible, we need to retain a national intervention capability, covering the widest possible spectrum of action, from counter-terrorism to high-intensity conflict to responding to hybrid attacks.”

Counterterrorism thus appears to be France's principal objective in the region: the *National Strategic Review 2022* emphasizes that the “international jihadist movement” requires “a military response, in support of local partners”.²³¹ Operation Chammal and the targeting operations conducted by the French special forces in Iraq and Syria thus retain their objective of limiting the expansion of terrorism throughout Syrian and Iraqi territory, combating the destabilization of states, and more broadly preventing the establishment of a hotbed of terrorist resurgence that could harm France's interests in the region, or even its national territory if the threat spreads. The Paris attacks of November 13, 2015, were planned in Syria, and all the members of the “commandos” involved (except Salah Abdeslam) had spent time in the area.²³² Combating terrorism on the ground also helps to limit the diffusion via online platforms of subversive messages that could accelerate the radicalization process in French territory.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, France's partners' diminishing interest in counterterrorism calls for a broadening of France's spectrum of security interests in the region. As a result, France also has security commitments in

230. *Strategic Update 2021*, Ministry of the Armed Forces, January 2021, 43.

231. *National Strategic Review 2022*, 12.

232. H. Radisson, “Au procès des attentats du 13 novembre, la DGSJ rembobine l'histoire de Daech”, *La Croix*, November 10, 2022, available at: www.la-croix.com.

the form of clauses to provide its partners with assistance, which it honored in the UAE by responding to Houthi attacks on Emirati territory in January 2022. France's participation in the EMASoH operation via its Agénor component is also designed to protect its security interests, in this case freedom of navigation and freedom of access to the theater, and so maintain the "national intervention capability" referred to in the *Strategic Update*. France's presence in the Middle East also enables the deployment of numerous intelligence gatherers, whether human or technological, which provide an independent situation assessment: it is thus important to maintain this presence so as to not become dependent on US intelligence, which might be politically oriented.

Moreover, France's activity in the Gulf helps to secure its energy supplies, although Paris is not directly involved in protecting oil fields like the United States might be in northeastern Syria. The Middle East supplies 14.7% of French hydrocarbon imports,²³³ giving the region particular significance in terms of France's energy security, especially in light of the war in Ukraine and the resulting scarcity of oil and gas resources.

Finally, France must also protect its citizens against security threats: although there are fewer French nationals in the Near and Middle East (140,689, or 8.3% of all French nationals living abroad²³⁴) than in the Maghreb, the risks in the region are numerous, as shown by the need to evacuate Syria at the beginning of the civil war. The activities of French, and more broadly Western, forces in the region are intended to promote stability in the countries of the Middle East and so create opportunities to develop commercial and cultural relations in order to promote French interests beyond security.

Economic relations between France and the Middle East are not currently at their most dynamic: between September 2021 and August 2022, French exports to the region, other than military equipment, represented 2.4% of France's total exports, for a total of around 13.4 billion euros. The trade balance is in equilibrium, however, given that French imports from the Middle East reached 13.8 billion euros in the same period, mostly of hydrocarbons.²³⁵ French exports are more diversified but mostly

233. According to INSEE, 14.7% of crude oil imported by France in 2021 came from the Middle East, with 7.7% from Saudi Arabia. The Middle East was France's third-biggest source of crude oil imports, after Africa (37.1%) and the former USSR (22.7%). Data available at: www.insee.fr.

234. According to the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 140,689 French nationals were registered at the consulates of the countries covered in this study in 2021, making up 8.3% of the global total. Data available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

235. France exports mainly to the UAE (32.3%), Saudi Arabia (25.8%), and Israel (15.1%). The picture is different for imports, which are dominated by oil producers: Saudi Arabia is first (34.7%), followed by Qatar (18.2%) and the UAE (13.9%). Refined petroleum products and natural hydrocarbons make up 98.3% of imports from Qatar to France, 96.4% of imports from Saudi Arabia, and 80.5% of imports from the UAE. See: French Directorate General of Customs and Indirect Taxes.

linked to the sectors of excellence for which France is famous abroad: civil aviation, cosmetics and pharmaceutical products, luxury leather goods. Although these products are certainly a way to maintain economic relations with the rich Gulf states and Israel, the economies of the countries in the Levant, still fairly sluggish and hampered by war, call for different types of investment.

Reconstruction is one of these opportunities, but the competition is strong. Turkey, China, and Iran have already established themselves in the construction and public works markets in Syria and Iraq. France's numerous attempts to do the same have been hampered by political instability and corruption. TotalEnergies is still awaiting the finalization of the 27-billion-dollar contract signed during Macron's visit to Baghdad in August 2021,²³⁶ while Alstom is being forced to wait for progress on the Baghdad metro works despite the first memoranda of understanding being signed in 2011.

Finally, there are also cultural interests to protect in the region. France is the guardian of several Catholic sites in Jerusalem, important symbols of the French presence in the area and its ties to the Christian community. However, Israeli forces sometimes improperly enter these sites, complicating the relationship between the two countries. More broadly, the promotion of the French language is an important aspect of France's cultural influence in a linguistically diverse area: Egypt and Lebanon are full members of the Organisation internationale de la francophonie, while Qatar and the UAE are associate members. In 2022, there were more than 690,000 French learners in schools and universities in the region, although 75% of these were in Lebanon.²³⁷

All these levers contribute more broadly to maintaining France's status as a major political power in the Middle East. France relies on its defense apparatus to achieve its stated goal of being a "stabilising power dedicated to peace and security",²³⁸ especially in the Middle East. Recourse to military force is facilitated by a strategic culture in which French decision-makers have "very little reluctance to use the military to accomplish their foreign policy",²³⁹ especially because of a lack of parliamentary pressure and a general faith in the efficacy of the armed forces.

236. "Le méga-contrat de TotalEnergies bloqué dans la phase finale de sa conclusion", *Intelligence Online*, April 20, 2022, available at: www.intelligenceonline.fr.

237. Observatoire de la Francophonie.

238. *Strategic Update 2021*, 45.

239. O. Schmitt, "Opérations extérieures et 'culture stratégique' française", in Fernandez and Jeangène Vilmer, *Les Opérations extérieures*, 51 et seq.

Getting Involved in Strategic Competition

An approach in which the defense establishment (including arms sales) plays such an important role can only ever partially bring about the conditions of peace and security that France wishes to see in the Middle East. Military intervention alone does not offer a long-term solution to the underlying problems predominantly caused by poor governance. Syria, Lebanon, and Libya are notable examples in this regard. As a result, although a continued focus on security is essential to tackle the threats facing the Middle East, France must also think carefully about the relevance of its current strategic posture.

A focus on counterterrorism alone no longer seems appropriate given that France's partners are demanding a more multifaceted approach, with politics and economics complementing security. If France remains committed to its current route and refuses to involve itself in strategic competition, it faces the medium-term risk of being downgraded and sidelined in favor of more flexible partners. The considerable efforts demanded of the French forces, and of the entire French defense apparatus, particularly the intelligence services, in the fight against terrorism also use up resources that could be allocated to strategic competition in order to gain a better understanding of the positions and intentions of the various actors who have recently entered the arena where France had been operating relatively unchallenged for a decade.

The concepts of “balancing power” and President Macron’s refusal “to be locked into bloc geopolitics”²⁴⁰ would also benefit from being better defined and implemented. If the intention is for France to take up a new role as a “mediating power”, that may turn out to be the wrong path for France in the region. Previous failures in Lebanon, Syria, or Libya have sapped the credibility of France’s mediation abilities, particularly because of a lack of attention to “parallel diplomacy”. Although Turkey or Oman have different interests to France, their mediation skills in Middle Eastern crises are widely recognized: it may, therefore, be more appropriate to leave the initial dialogues to them, and then to support them if needed once first contact has been made. To do so, visits by ministers or senior military officers to the small Gulf nations, particularly Oman, would be a good way to maintain the partnership at little expense.

By contrast, if the concept of “balancing power” is understood as a way to encourage multilateralism and peace and prevent the development of a Sunni or Shiite hegemony in the region, that may be a viable aim, but it must be stated, explained, made credible, and supported by a reflection on France’s partnerships. Promoting an idea of balance that is detached from the reality on the ground, particularly with regard to the risk to regional

240. *National Strategic Review 2022*, 15.

security posed by Iran, would be counterproductive. A more realistic policy that takes current developments into account would have more chance of succeeding. France is recognized by its partners, principally the United States, for its ability to deal with all actors and to serve as a “go-between” for transmitting messages that are difficult for Washington to send because of its own positioning, provided that these activities are carried out in coordination with other actors.²⁴¹

This “balancing” ability means offering a less confrontational path than that taken by the United States and its allies in the Middle East, both toward the “axis of resistance” and the “axis of Abraham”. The key is to retain room for maneuver without losing the interest of preexisting allies. The legacy of the “Arab policy”, which deliberately did not take a transactional approach, allows France to maintain good relations with most contemporary Middle Eastern leaders, although recent initiatives like the Baghdad Conference have been strongly criticized by Iraqi politicians, who see it as a French attempt to interfere in the country. Maintaining these good relations while keeping a sensible distance from the “sovereignty initiatives” promoted for Iraq would allow France to reinvest in the country once political stability has been achieved. Likewise, given the lack of consistency within the “axis of Abraham” and the divergences from France’s positions on various issues, particularly the Iranian nuclear question, it is important not to approach the axis as a bloc, but rather to develop bilateral alliances with each of its members. More broadly, the return of strategic competition and shifting alliances call for a redefinition of France’s military presence and partnership strategy.

A Strategy of Defending France’s Interests

France must become more competitive in the Middle East if it wants to retain its long-standing position there. This competitiveness relies particularly on the legal protection of the French armed forces deployed in the region. A review of current partnerships and how they could be adjusted is essential for consolidating the French military presence in an increasingly contested environment. Finally, the French military presence could be restructured to confront new threats and challenges more effectively.

Establishing Defense Agreements and Legal Protections for the Armed Forces

France’s relationships with its regional partners are governed by a series of defense, security, or military cooperation agreements, which come in

241. Interview with a Western diplomat, Paris, July 7, 2022.

several forms, with varying degrees of obligation. In a sign of the strategic proximity between France and the UAE, the federation is the only country in the region to have signed a complete defense agreement with France, in place since 2009, including an assistance clause that was invoked by Abu Dhabi in February 2022. Other types of agreements cover, for example, possible joint training exercises between the armed forces of both countries, or permission to fly military aircraft over foreign territory.

Table 3: List of defense, security, and cooperation agreements between France and Middle Eastern countries

Country	Date	Type of agreement
Saudi Arabia	October 9, 1982	Military cooperation and assistance
	February 24, 2008	Cooperation on internal security and civil defense
Bahrain	November 30, 2007	Cooperation on internal security and civil defense
Egypt	June 30, 2005	Military and technical cooperation
United Arab Emirates	April 29, 1977	Military cooperation and arms
	September 10, 1991	Military cooperation and arms
	January 18, 1995	Defense cooperation
	May 26, 2009	Defense cooperation
	December 15, 2010	Status of forces agreement (SOFA)
Iraq	September 1, 1974	Provision of equipment to the Iraqi armed forces
	November 16, 2009	Defense cooperation
Jordan	December 2, 1995	Military cooperation and bilateral defense relations
	February 12, 2018	Status of forces agreement (SOFA)
Kuwait	October 21, 2009	Defense cooperation
Lebanon	November 20, 2008	Defense cooperation (supplementing an agreement of 1975)
Qatar	August 2, 1994	Defense cooperation
	July 29, 2022	Status of forces agreement (SOFA)

The most important measures for ensuring the long-term presence of French forces overseas are status of forces agreements (SOFA), which regulate the deployment of French forces in the host country and guarantee legal protection for those forces. SOFAs are in place in the great majority of countries where French forces are currently stationed: the creation of the FFEAU in 2009 was followed by the signing of a SOFA with the UAE in 2010, while the presence of military personnel from Operation Chammal at the BAP H5 in Jordan is also covered by a SOFA. The signing of a SOFA between Qatar and France, under discussion since 2021 and completed in July 2022, covers the highly controversial deployment of French military personnel to provide security at the FIFA World Cup in Qatar.²⁴² Finally, soldiers from Operation Daman in Lebanon are under the protection of the United Nations.

The exception to these legal safeguards seems to be Iraq, where no defense agreement has been signed by the current authorities: the 2009 defense agreement was not ultimately ratified by the Iraqi Parliament, and there is no SOFA between France and Iraq to protect the French forces deployed there as part of Operation Chammal or on COS (Commandement des opérations spéciales; Special Operations Command) missions. Nor are there any technical agreements, such as memoranda of understanding, regulating the exchange of intelligence with Iraq.²⁴³ Although the French forces are unofficially attached to the American SOFA, itself subject to intense political pressure due to instrumentalization of the foreign presence in Iraq, and although the Iraqi authorities seem satisfied with this arrangement for the time being, it remains a precarious position: France must urgently put pressure on its Iraqi partner to obtain proper legal agreements. This is particularly important if the French presence in the country is to be made permanent, possibly outside the framework of OIR and in a political context that could rapidly become unstable, necessitating the departure of foreign forces from the country, as happened in Mali in the first half of 2022.²⁴⁴

Rethinking the Partnership Strategy in a Context of Strategic Competition

Beyond these legal considerations, current geopolitical developments in the region call for a revision of France's partnership policy, or at least a review in light of a broader reflection on France's partnered military operations

242. Statement to the French Senate by Olivier Becht, minister delegate for foreign trade, economic attractiveness, and French nationals abroad, on the draft bill authorizing the approval of an agreement between the Government of the French Republic and the Government of the State of Qatar regarding the status of their forces, on July 19, 2022, available at: www.vie-publique.fr.

243. Interview at the Ministry of the Armed Forces, June 1, 2022.

244. On this topic, see L. Bansept and É. Tenenbaum, "Après Barkhane : repenser la posture stratégique française en Afrique de l'Ouest", *Focus stratégique*, no. 109, Ifri, May 2022.

around the world and its stated desire to “act within balanced partnerships, providing security”.²⁴⁵

The loss of interest in counterterrorism among France’s partners in Operation Chammal, namely the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Iraqi Kurdish forces, and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), casts doubt on the suitability of support focused solely on operational training for counterinsurgency. Indeed, that approach seems to have reached its limits: too focused on elite forces, which are now overused to the point of exhaustion, French support risks neglecting the rest of the Iraqi army, which is nevertheless indispensable for missions securing Iraq’s territory and for establishing its sovereignty as promised by Macron. France could increase its military resources in Iraq to help train the regular army while remaining attentive to its Iraqi partner: parliamentary recommendations of a focus on the “top end of the spectrum” and high-intensity combat are, therefore, not necessarily aligned.²⁴⁶

This kind of reinforcement of the regular army would also help to rebalance France’s partnership with Baghdad, as opposed to with Erbil. Although Iraqi Kurdistan rapidly became the obvious choice of partner in 2014 because of the historical ties between France and Kurdistan and because it was more politically stable than the rest of the region, the increasing strength of the Iraqi army makes it possible to envisage a reduction in support to the Iraqi Kurds. The latter, in particular the KDP forces, are not the only group to manipulate Western support, especially to achieve their political goals of eliminating their opponents and acquiring legitimacy. Moreover, KDP forces are sometimes slightly reluctant to act against Daesh because of tactical agreements between the terrorist group and the Kurdish militias aimed at limiting Daesh incursions into the south of Iraqi Kurdistan.²⁴⁷ Finally, the notorious links between the KDP and Turkey, as well as the hostility between the PKK—on which the SDF depends—and the KDP, could further blur France’s partnership message in the region.

Of course, there should be no abrupt change of strategy that leaves the Iraqi Kurdish forces to other partners and that looks on the international stage like an “abandonment” of the Kurds. Nevertheless, increased circumspection with regard to the Kurds, particularly within the special forces, whose pro-Kurd tendencies are well known, would be beneficial in order to reimagine the relationship from a more transactional perspective and to prepare for any changes on the Kurdish side. The independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2017, which all the Kurds’ Western

245. *National Strategic Review 2022*, 27.

246. Meyer and Rouillard, *Rapport d’information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient*, 111.

247. Interview with a former analyst at the Ministry of the Armed Forces, Paris, February 16, 2022. See also Luizard, *Le Piège Daech*, 24.

partners had warned Masoud Barzani against, should be borne in mind as an example of Kurdistan's volatility as a partner. Similar questions arise in Syria regarding the relationship between France and the SDF, but also Paris's posture vis-à-vis Damascus. The Syrian Kurdish forces have their own sources of leverage, particularly the detention of French jihadists in camps and prisons, with France's recent change of heart regarding repatriations a welcome development (see above).

Paradoxically, while France refuses all contact with the regime in Damascus, the autonomous authority of northeastern Syria has repeatedly sought to hold discussions with the capital concerning the future of its territory. Assad seems to be gradually recovering his acceptability in the Middle East: he was welcomed in Abu Dhabi in March 2022 following a visit to Damascus by the Emirati minister of foreign affairs in 2021. This thawing of relations was justified on the Emirati side by Syria's importance to Arab civilization, and more broadly to the stability of the Middle East.²⁴⁸ More prosaically, a Syria that has been partially reconstructed and stabilized by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, even if that means retaining Assad as its leader, is more beneficial to Abu Dhabi and Riyadh than a Syria rebuilt by Iran.

The war in Ukraine, which has led to an indirect confrontation between France and Russia, Syria's sponsor, is currently preventing any possibility of discussions regarding the regime in Damascus. Nevertheless, if France wants to be a balancing power, it must carefully consider its relationship with the Syrian regime after the war in Ukraine is over. It must also talk to its regional partners, who may be less sensitive on the issue. This reflection must be part of a wider reassessment of the Syrian issue, taking into account Turkey's posture vis-à-vis HTS and the Kurds, as well as relations with the Kurds themselves.

This reexamination of French foreign policy in light of regional developments could also apply to Israel, beyond the Palestinian question. Although abandoning negotiations on the issue is not the answer, France's ability to act as a credible mediator in this context is questionable. At a time when France's partners are strengthening their ties with Israel in the face of a common threat, and as Tel Aviv is emerging as an increasingly in-demand competitor to Paris—and Europe in general—in areas that were previously France's preserve (troop training, arms industry...), a redefinition of the Franco-Israeli relationship should be on the cards.

Although the question of human rights can certainly be raised in this context, it falls on deaf ears given that France is itself accused of participating indirectly in the Saudi war effort in Yemen, and moreover has close ties to the Emirati and Qatari regimes, which can hardly be considered

248. K. Alam, "How UAE's Deep Ties with Syria Came Out in the Open", *Middle East Eye*, March 24, 2022, available at: www.middleeasteye.net.

models of democracy. More broadly, Paris must confront the dilemma of human rights, as it is one of the main factors damaging public perception of France's foreign policy in the Middle East. It will always be difficult to accept the divergence between France's identity as a promoter of human rights, including with its dictatorial partners, and France's interests, which require it to make concessions without completely denying that identity.

Generally speaking, faced with the blatant opportunism displayed by all of France's regional partners in the Middle East, now is the time for caution and for honing France's presence so as to be able to deal with new threats and assess developments in the area more accurately. It is essential to move away from the idea that all local partners are friends with interests identical to those of France.

Reconfiguring the Military Presence around Better-Defined Poles

France's strategic posture is concentrated around two main hubs: Jordan in the west, where the BAP H5 is the home base of the *Rafales* carrying out missions against Daesh within Operation Chammal, as well as of some of the logistical support for the operation; and the UAE in the east, home to the FFEAU. Nevertheless, these bases do not have the same status: while the FFEAU, the "showcase" of French capacity,²⁴⁹ are permanently prepositioned forces, the BAP H5 is a temporary operational arrangement, although one with no planned end date. This has consequences for independent assessment of the situation in the region, and more broadly for France's strategic posture in the Middle East.

The permanent area of responsibility (*zone de responsabilité permanente*; ZRP), of ALINDIEN, the admiral in charge of the FFEAU, is extremely large: it stretches from the River Jordan to the borders of Australia, encompassing the east coast of Africa and so the Persian Gulf. As a result, the FFEAU, of which ALINDIEN is the force commander (COMFOR), have a naval focus that is not always suited to missions like the fight against terrorism or cooperation with armed forces other than those of the UAE. Moreover, this area of responsibility does not cover all the countries of the Middle East: Syria, Israel, Lebanon, and Egypt are outside it,²⁵⁰ creating a division that is not particularly useful.

To remedy these problems, one possibility would be to decouple the roles of ALINDIEN and the commander of the FFEAU. The latter could then be transformed into COMFOR PMO, with a ZRP covering the entire

249. É. Tenenbaum, M. Paglia and N. Ruffié, "Confettis d'empire ou points d'appui ? L'avenir de la stratégie française de présence et de souveraineté", *op. cit.*, 63.

250. These countries fall within the area of responsibility of the commander-in-chief for the Mediterranean (CECMED), based in Toulon.

Near and Middle East, thus matching the definitions of the Middle East used by the Ministry of the Armed Forces and the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. The Near and Middle East would then be treated separately from the Indian Ocean, with the ALINDIEN moved to somewhere like the headquarters of the French Armed Forces of the Southern Zone of the Indian Ocean (Forces armées dans la zone sud de l'océan Indien; FAZSOI) in La Réunion. Nevertheless, close cooperation between the COMFOR PMO and the new ALINDIEN would remain vital to the continuation of certain highly valued naval initiatives in the region, particularly the trilateral exercises between France, the UAE, and India (see above).

This reorganization would take place alongside the establishment of the BAP H5 in Jordan on a permanent footing in order to continue to support Jordan as a partner despite its intrinsic weaknesses. Within the ZRP and under the authority of the COMFOR PMO, an operational pole of cooperation (*pôle opérationnel de coopération*; POC) could be established at the permanent BAP H5, following the model of certain French forces based in West Africa. This Levant POC could retain responsibility for ground and air logistics missions in support of cooperation and training missions with partner forces in the Levant (in the form of operational instruction detachments [*détachements d'instruction opérationnelle*; DIO], for example) and serve as a hub for the special forces, which would be responsible for all counterterrorism and intelligence missions in partnership with Syrian, Iraqi, and Jordanian forces.²⁵¹

The rest of the French Forces in the Near and Middle East (FFPMO), still based in the UAE, could concentrate on partnerships with the Gulf states, training the armed forces in the area (whose needs are very different to those of the Jordanian or Iraqi forces), situation assessments in the eastern Middle East, and Operation Agénor, the continuation of which seems important in light of Iran's regular demonstrations of strength in the Persian Gulf. This delimitation would also make it possible for France to continue to show its support for the UAE while signaling to the armed forces of other countries in the region that France can help them and is not solely focused on a single-partner arrangement.

Beyond this logic of concentration, which would create better-defined poles and rationalize costs, it remains essential to maintain points of contact in countries where France has signed defense agreements, as well as within multinational operations and institutions. In the Middle East, this role could be performed by liaison officers within defense missions or national bodies, or by embedded French officers. France needs representatives at NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) to maintain its influence within the mission. Although NMI now seems to be largely under British

251. É. Tenenbaum, M. Paglia and N. Ruffié, "Confettis d'empire ou points d'appui ? L'avenir de la stratégie française de présence et de souveraineté", *op. cit.*, 148.

control, and while its missions are currently poorly understood in France,²⁵² it could be a suitable multinational framework if France chose to take up a larger role within it. Its complementarity with OIR enables a growing distinction between the functions of advising the high politico-military authorities on the one hand, and providing operational support for forces on the other.

Moreover, the US's desire to reduce its military investment in the Middle East and the importance of promoting a balanced position, for example regarding Turkey, which is already using NMI to further its own security interests in the region, particularly against the PKK, present a definite opportunity—as much as a challenge—for France to reinvest in the area. Other partners, like Canada, Spain, or Denmark, have chosen to invest in the mission on a long-term basis in parallel with their own bilateral relations with Iraq. Nevertheless, NMI does not have its own logistical resources, and its fate is thus dependent on that of the Coalition.

Finally, France's presence in UNIFIL, another multilateral organization in the Middle East, should not be exempt from reassessment given the limited benefits it offers the armed forces, and French policy more broadly. While UNIFIL remains paralyzed by the lack of political will to implement an imperfect mandate, rendering it impossible, for example, to gather intelligence on Hezbollah or to effectively train the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) (see above), one solution could be to reduce the French contingent and to transfer the troops thus freed up directly to France's bilateral relationship with Lebanon. This reinforcement would make it possible to capitalize on France's political efforts to support Lebanon, and given that France seems to be the last Western country that still wants to save Lebanon, there would probably be no strategic competitors disputing this connection with the LAF. This might make it easier to impose aid conditionality by taking advantage of Lebanon's significant dependence on France.

Other officers embedded in the various components of Operation Chammal—civil-military actions (J9), operation planning (J3), or the CENTCOM (US Central Command) headquarters in Tampa, Florida—could also be called upon more often by France, turning them into opportunity sensors and ensuring that France's positions are properly defended in multinational contexts. More broadly, it is important to move away from a “rolling” approach to external operations, where the very short mandate (four months) is not conducive to forging long-term relations with partners or building deep knowledge of the terrain, in particular for sensitive intelligence gathering missions carried out by the COS.

252. Meyer and Rouillard, *Rapport d'information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient*, 84.

Likewise, the role of cooperation officers must also be highlighted, with the Direction de la coopération de sécurité et de défense (DCSD) (Directorate of Security and Defense Cooperation) acting as an important mechanism of French influence abroad.²⁵³ Although a fair number of the 249 military cooperation officers at the DCSD are in the Middle East, the region remains less well served than others, like West Africa.²⁵⁴ It is true that the language barrier and the strong Anglo-American influence in the region could hamper cooperation activities, but it is essential to continue to try, both locally and in France by welcoming foreign officers at military academies, particularly the École de guerre, and identifying the “personalities of the future” via dedicated schemes set up in different ministries. Based on the African model, regionally oriented national schools could be set up as permanent training centers for local militaries while separating the French presence from the crisis and war situations that still justify it.²⁵⁵ These cooperation efforts must be coordinated properly with other actors on the ground, particularly the Défense Conseil International (DCI) group, so as to diversify the training offered to Middle Eastern partners and to promote French expertise.

Decomartmentalizing and Coordinating Efforts in Order to Align Strategy and Means

As in numerous other domains, French overseas strategy is regularly accused of being overly compartmentalized, with a lack of coordination between ministries or even between departments within each ministry. More regular exchanges and a joint strategy seem indispensable for dealing with the many threats and challenges facing France in the Middle East. A reconsideration at the European level is also necessary in order to pool expertise.

Interministerial Efforts to Diversify Influence

Within the defense staff, the *chef d'état-major des armées* (CEMA) (chief of the defense staff) has a *Stratégie militaire opérationnelle* (SMO, operational military strategy), a classified internal document that is based on the CEMA's *Strategic Vision*²⁵⁶ and covers all regions where France has forces or military interests. The SMO for the Near and Middle East (SMO-PMO)

253. J.-M. Palagos, “Défense Conseil International : répondre aux enjeux de formation des armées étrangères”, *Revue Défense Nationale* 799, no. 4, 2017: 85–90.

254. Directorate of Security and Defense Cooperation, “Rapport d'activité 2021”, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

255. Meyer and Rouillard, *Rapport d'information sur la stabilité au Moyen-Orient*, 68.

256. French Defense Staff, “Strategic Vision of the Chief of Defense Staff”, October 2021, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

lists two objectives for France in the Middle East: the fight against terrorism and freedom of access and navigation. But the document was drawn up by soldiers, for soldiers: this strategy is probably limited to the means available to the CEMA to accomplish his mission, without going beyond militarily realistic ambitions and without incorporating interministerial levers.²⁵⁷

The *National Strategic Review 2022* is an interesting interministerial solution, but it only touches briefly on the Middle East. None of the countries in the region are named except for Iran and Syria. Although it makes valid observations about the “the diplomatic and military emboldening of certain regional powers [that] is concomitant with the destabilisation of already fragile countries”,²⁵⁸ it offers few concrete suggestions. Partnerships are only discussed in relation to the Gulf states, where “a revitalisation of France’s partnerships [...] is necessary to cope with the new strategic agreement landscape”,²⁵⁹ i.e., the Abraham Accords and the increasing importance of Russia, China, or even Turkey.

Going further, a “French strategy in the Middle East” modeled on the “French strategy in the Indo-Pacific”²⁶⁰ presented in summer 2021 to the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs—which followed the “French defense strategy in the Indo-Pacific”²⁶¹ published in May 2019 by the Ministry of the Armed Forces—would enable France to act in a more targeted fashion across the spectrum without overusing an already stretched military apparatus. A “general strategic posture review” based on the American *Global Posture Review* could also be carried out to provide an overview of all French overseas deployments.

Developing such framework documents, prefaced by the president and rolled out to several ministries, would help to clarify the government’s strategy, internally and to France’s partners, by tackling the big questions discussed in this study: the relevance of the fight against terrorism, the evolution of partnerships, etc. This kind of strategy would also facilitate coordination between ministries and the allocation of objectives and levers. With this in mind, it would also be useful to make the interministerial working groups piloted by the Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale (SGDSN) (Secretariat-General for National Defense and Security) into a permanent arrangement, as well as to protect intelligence efforts across the entire threat spectrum and to maintain as many sensors deployed in the area as possible.

257. Interview at the Ministry of the Armed Forces, June 2022.

258. *National Strategic Review 2022*, 12.

259. *Ibid.*, 46.

260. “La stratégie de la France dans l’Indopacifique”, Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, February 2022, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

261. “La stratégie de défense française en Indopacifique”, Ministry of the Armed Forces, May 2019, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

Finally, following the publication of the “influence roadmap” by the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs in December 2021, the creation of the “influence” strategic function in the *National Strategic Review 2022* represents interesting new opportunities to multiply France’s levers of action in the Middle East in line with the diversity of threats and interests to defend. Ways to improve France’s military influence²⁶² have already been discussed in this study, particularly advanced military education and the role of cooperation officers, but other ministries and state agencies also have a place in this strategy.

One of these levers is development aid, which, in the form of investments in humanitarian sectors like sanitation or agriculture, can be a way to combine the objectives of stabilization and economic profitability. Projects led by the Agence française de développement (AFD) (French Development Agency), already active in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Yemen via its office in Beirut and various regional branches, are interesting in this regard. In its 2020-2030 regional strategy for the Middle East, AFD identifies several priorities, including strengthening social cohesion and the systematic use of partnerships, particularly within “Team France”, in order to implement a “3D” approach: Development, Diplomacy, and Defense.²⁶³

Caution should be exercised regarding this aid, however: any attempts to make aid conditional on good governance criteria could see France’s partners turn to competitors like China or Russia, who, as discussed above, do not make their support subject to conditions—or at least not immediate ones. At the same time, unconditional aid would risk simply feeding corruption without making any tangible progress on reconstructing and improving the country concerned. These well-known negative effects of development aid must be taken seriously in France’s approach to the Middle East.

This approach could also be accompanied by efforts to deepen ties between France’s overseas representatives and local civil society, as a way to circumvent governments prone to monopolizing or manipulating aid or advice from Paris. Although France’s highly centralized structure of government is careful to leave plenty of room for “traditional” diplomacy, this model is mainly valid in countries with similar state structures to France. In Middle Eastern countries, particularly Iraq, Jordan, or Syria, contacts with associations, trade unions, and social movements, including opposition movements, are indispensable and could be strengthened and supported by embassies, Instituts français, or other channels of influence.²⁶⁴

262. B. Debray, “Quelle contribution militaire à la stratégie d’influence de la France ?”, *Revue Défense Nationale*, vol. h-, no. HS3, 2022: 263–76.

263. “Middle East Regional Strategy 2020–2030”, Agence française de développement, available at: www.afd.fr.

264. “Maghreb, Moyen-Orient : une priorité de politique étrangère pour la France”, Groupe Avicenne, March 2017, 29 et seq, available at: <https://groupeavicenne.files.wordpress.com>.

Additional human and financial investment in French-language media broadcasting locally, like France 24 or RFI, has already been confirmed and should be welcomed. Analysis of social networks and the identification of channels of influence would also be useful in order to better understand and act on societies where France wants to spread its humanist values. This approach would help to counter anti-French sentiment, which, although less strong in the Middle East than in Africa, could grow rapidly in the event of controversy regarding the place of Islam and Muslims in France, subjects that have already been taken up by media outlets like Al Jazeera, a Qatari organ. Nevertheless, relying on sources already identified as French may be insufficient or even counterproductive given the intense disinformation campaigns being conducted against the Western powers in the Middle East by China and Russia.²⁶⁵

As a result, levers like the network of French schools or the French language should be used with caution to avoid accusations through these disinformation campaigns in a region where many elites and elderly people still speak French. In countries with no French tradition, like the Gulf states, initiatives like the Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, the Louvre Abu Dhabi, or the management contract for the cultural site of Al-'Ula should be welcomed, although they remain underexploited: problems with the level and appeal for students have been raised by advisors working there, as well as difficulties with conducting certain courses in French.²⁶⁶

Finally, relations with local academic bodies, such as research centers or think tanks, are important for creating a shared strategic culture and gaining a better understanding of France's partners' expectations in terms of security and defense. Although these relations already exist in countries with well-developed research ecosystems, like Israel, elsewhere there is still much work to be done in identifying and building such relationships, for example with the help of French think tanks, the Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire (IRSEM) (Institute for Strategic Research), or the Direction générale des relations internationales et de la stratégie (DGRIS) (Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy). French research institutes already established in the region, like the Institut français du Proche-Orient (French Institute of the Near East) or the Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem (French Research Center in Jerusalem), could also be called on more often, including for this mapping and partnership approach. This work could lead to the creation of new regional forums, like the Manama Dialogue run by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) or the German-Gulf Dialogue Forum.

265. E. Janadze, "The Digital Middle East: Another Front in Russia's Information War", Middle East Institute, April 19, 2022, available at: www.mei.edu.

266. Interview with a French diplomat, Abu Dhabi, May 2022.

Rethinking the French Posture from a European Perspective

While France has a presence in the Middle East thanks to its own history and interests, it is also part of a broader interaction between the region and Europe as a whole. The reduction of the American presence and the multipolarization of actors in the region represent an opportunity for European countries and for the EU to mobilize all their means and assets. Because of their geographical proximity, which gives them stronger structural ties to the region than the United States, most European countries are also more exposed to threats coming from the Middle East, although not all share the same interest in the region. Europe has been more affected by the phenomenon of foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq; it depends strongly on hydrocarbons from the Middle East, especially now that imports from Russia have declined; and migration is a persistent political concern in its relationship with the countries in the south and east of the Mediterranean.²⁶⁷

In France's *National Strategic Review 2022*, Spain and Italy emerge as preferred European partners in the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean theaters of operation. Rome plans to deploy 1,180 military personnel split between operation *Prima Parthica* (the Italian component of OIR) and NMI,²⁶⁸ while the Italian Navy remains a leading partner in the Eastern Mediterranean. Italy's strategic direction could, however, be compromised by Giorgia Meloni's new far-right government. The French and Spanish armed forces also cooperate effectively in the fight against Daesh, the training of Iraqi forces, and the sharing of intelligence. Moreover, the Scandinavian countries should not be overlooked: thanks to small, effective deployments of special forces working closely with Iraqi or Kurdish troops, Denmark and Norway are sought-after partners in the fight against terrorism. The shift toward cooperation in the context of strategic competition will have to be approached with great caution, however, given the state character of the interests defended.

Finally, Germany has long appeared to be a possible partner for France in the Middle East. Although it does not have significant numbers of troops deployed in the region,²⁶⁹ Berlin has excellent ties with local civil society, particularly thanks to its large-scale development aid policy, already implemented in Africa,²⁷⁰ and a network of political foundations.²⁷¹ The

267. J. Barnes-Dacey and H. Lovatt, "Principled Pragmatism: Europe's Place in a Multipolar Middle East", *op. cit.*

268. F. Salesio Schiavi, "In Iraq, Italy and France Are Looking for a Primary Role to Play", Italian Institute for International Political Studies, October 18, 2021.

269. There are 240 German military personnel deployed in Syria, Iraq, and Jordan, primarily on logistical support missions.

270. A. Antil and P. Maurice, "Après le Mali, quel engagement de l'Allemagne au Sahel ?", *Notes du Cerfa*, no. 169, Ifri, June 2022.

“green diplomacy” initiative established by the German coalition government is also interesting in terms of diversifying the economies of the Gulf states, which are currently confronting the energy transition and could benefit from European aid in this area.²⁷² Nevertheless, this partnership could be complicated by the recent strain put on Franco-German relations by the war in Ukraine, and by the different approaches to arms exports in the two countries, with Berlin much stricter on the criteria that must be respected, particularly regarding human rights.²⁷³

More broadly, at the European level, several joint initiatives have already been launched in the Middle East. Operation EMaOH and its ATALANTA counterpart in the Horn of Africa are, despite their limitations, good examples of military cooperation between EU countries in the region, enabling France to position itself on a credible “maritime security” platform. The E3 format (France, the United Kingdom, and Germany) is also very involved in negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program, with the backing of the EU. Nevertheless, discussions have currently stalled because of the war in Ukraine, but also and above all because of the failure to resolve certain points that can only be settled by direct discussion between the United States and Iran, thus revealing the limits of European power in this area.

On a more positive note, and illustrating the shift in the Middle East’s center of gravity toward the Gulf as well as the concentration of efforts in that area, in May 2022 the EU adopted and announced a “Strategic Partnership with the Gulf”.²⁷⁴ This partnership primarily covers “global security threats” as well as energy security, climate change, digitalization, and trade. Likewise, “the need to increase the EU’s investment in [the] peace and stability of the Middle East and the Gulf”²⁷⁵ figures among the objectives of the EU’s *Strategic Compass* adopted in 2022.

Although France pursues its own interests in the region, it could be useful for Paris to refer regularly to these strategic documents, and to push for a broader reflection on partnerships between the EU and the Middle East, continuing the influence efforts begun during France’s last presidency of the Council of the European Union. While the EU has drawn up strategies for Central Asia, Central America, the Arctic, Asia, and Africa,

271. “Maghreb, Moyen-Orient : une priorité de politique étrangère pour la France”, Groupe Avicenne, *op. cit.*

272. T. Borck and S. Sons, “Germany’s New Government and the Middle East”, *RUSI*, January 14, 2022, available at: <https://rusi.org>.

273. R. Bosen, “Germany and the Middle East: A Tale of Morals and Markets”, *DW*, September 14, 2021, available at: www.dw.com.

274. “GCC: EU Unveils Strategic Partnership with the Gulf”, European Commission, May 18, 2022, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu>.

275. *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defense*, Council of the European Union, March 21, 2022, available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu>.

there is no specific document addressing the Middle East as a whole,²⁷⁶ and the region is barely touched on in the 2016 *European Union Global Strategy*.²⁷⁷ The EU must, however, establish itself as an actor in the Middle East in order to conserve its leverage and its credibility in the region and to capitalize on its numerous economic, political, security, and cultural assets. Finally, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the countries of Eastern Europe will probably try to commit the EU to a more aggressive stance against Russia: the Middle East is one of the possible arenas for this contestation, despite most countries in the region having stated that they would prefer to remain non-aligned.

276. P. Osiewicz, “The EU and the Middle East: In Search of a Strategy”, Middle East Institute, January 24, 2019, available at: www.mei.edu.

277. A. Dessì, “The EU Global Strategy and the MENA Region: In Search of Resilience”, Istituto Affari Internazionali, December 13, 2018.

Conclusion

Charles de Gaulle's "simple ideas",²⁷⁸ which informed France's "Arab policy" in the Middle East during the second half of the twentieth century, whereby France positioned itself as an alternative to the two Cold War blocs and offered unconditional support to Arab regimes in return for secure access to energy resources and a market for the French arms industry, are now outdated.

France's strategic posture in the region was called into question at the beginning of the 2010s, when the first tremors were felt across the Middle East following the Arab Spring and then the emergence of Daesh. Taken unawares by the partial collapse of a previously stable system in which it was possible to distinguish fairly clearly between France's allies and its enemies, France's strategic posture and, more broadly, its vision for the Middle East underwent a shift toward crisis management and a fight against terrorism that has undeniably been successful in operational terms but that has not managed to tackle the deep roots of the problem. This counterterrorist focus is now being challenged by France's long-standing partners.

Moreover, given the reduction of the terror threat and the United States' partial withdrawal from the region, strategic competition between the great empires could return to the Levant and the Persian Gulf: Russia, Iran, China, and Turkey are fighting over the resources of a "masterless"²⁷⁹ region, forcing states to adapt by forming new alliances, like the Abraham Accords, which subvert one of the principal frameworks for understanding the Middle East until now: Arab antagonism toward Israel. Another long-standing framework, the opposition between Sunnis and Shiites, is also becoming less relevant, with the previously homogeneous "Shia crescent" fragmenting into public protests and the "Sunni bloc" continuing to tear itself apart because of tension within the Gulf Cooperation Council. In the long term, there is a risk that this strategic competition could solidify due to the Sino-American rivalry already in evidence in the region, but also due to the war in Ukraine, the consequences of which are being felt by France's enemies as well as its partners in the Middle East.

If France does not want to be sidelined from these developments in a politically and economically dynamic region, it must overhaul its strategy in

278. H. Le Masne de Chermont, "Vers l'Orient compliqué je volais avec des idées simples", un aphorisme trompeur ?", *Revue Défense Nationale* 845, no. 10, 2021: 106–12.

279. C. Thépaut, *Le Monde arabe en morceaux : des printemps arabes au recul américain*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2020, 201.

the Middle East, without excluding anything that might have been impossible in recent years. France has solid advantages that have been tried and tested by continuous military deployments and unwavering commitment to several partners, particularly Iraq, certain Kurdish groups, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates. It is, however, time to move away from a sole focus on security interests and embrace the full complexity of French interests in the region, be they political, economic, energy, or cultural, in a context of renewed strategic competition. It is important to do so before France's presence in the region becomes too contested, as has already happened in West Africa.

This reflection could involve an overhaul of France's commitments to its partners: while it would certainly be possible to reduce their extent or limit them to operational support without fully taking into account and prioritizing the needs of each partner, it is likely that other states, including competitors, would step in to address those needs themselves, for better or probably for worse. An increased focus on costs/benefits, while continuing to uphold the traditional values of France's engagement in the region, is thus needed, especially regarding Lebanon, Kurdistan, and Israel. More broadly, caution should be exercised toward all partners, which are displaying an opportunism that is understandable in this context of strategic competition that France has struggled to fully appreciate or counteract.

Finally, this process cannot be left entirely to the Ministry of the Armed Forces: an interministerial approach seems essential for mobilizing all of France's available levers and multiplying its channels of influence. This reflection could also be carried out at the EU level in order to pool efforts and expertise and, in the spirit of Charles de Gaulle, to stay relevant amid the complex tangle of factors at play in this vital game.

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